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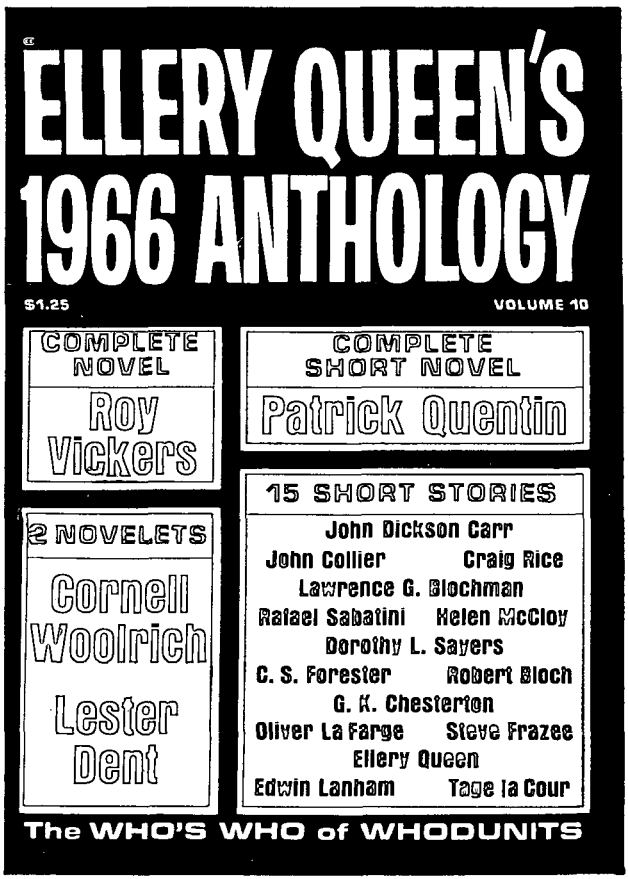

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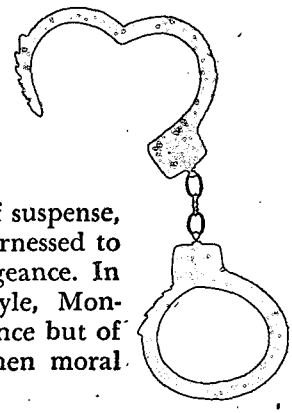

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THE OLD BARN ON THE POND

by URSULA CURTISS

HE CAME BACK ON A RAW, DARKLY glistening day in March, but it was not at all the triumphant return he had planned. It was a hasty, off-balance thing, like being pushed rudely onto a stage before the raised trumpets had blown a single note.

Conlon's letter—the letter that had brought him tumbling up from New York to this inhospitable part of the New England countryside—was still in his pocket. He had never liked Conlon, but the architect was Marian's cousin and it would have looked odd, when he had the old barn remodeled, to have given the job to someone else. And now here was Conlon writing ". . . have been approached by friends about the possibility of renting your property here for the summer, with an option to buy. As they have a young child, they would like to drain the pond, and although I told them I was certain you would not permit this—"

For a moment the typed lines had blurred before Howard Hildreth's eyes—except for that one staring phrase.

Drain the pond.

Not yet, he thought lucidly—not after only six months. Anonymous in the 42nd Street Library, he had read up on the subject, and learned that under certain conditions—depth of water, amount of rainfall, and other climatic factors—this kind of soil might have sucked its secret under at the end of a year, provided there was no extensive digging.

But not yet. He had sat down at once to write a brief note of refusal,

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but another phrase struck up at him from Conlon's letter. ". . . I was certain you would not permit this —"

A deliberate challenge? Bill Conlon was Marian's cousin, remember, and had been away at the time. Better go up there, stay a week or two, establish the impression of keeping the place as a country retreat upon which he might descend at any time. It was only necessary for Conlon; the townspeople, he was sure, accepted his remodeling of the barn as proof of his faith that his missing wife would some day return.

At that thought, alone in his comfortable apartment, Howard Hildreth shuddered . . .

On the station platform there were gratifying little whispers and stirs of recognition— "Isn't that Howard Hildreth, the playwright? I'm sure it is"—and a turning of heads which he pretended not to see. He could hardly pretend not to see Conlon, striding across the platform toward him with his fair head a little cocked. Conlon had Marian's eyes, light gray with a peculiar curl of lid; but that was the only physical resemblance between them.

Hildreth put out a hand and said with an air of geniality, "Well, this is kind. I hope you haven't been meeting trains all day?"

Conlon sent one of his roving glances around the platform. "Matter of fact, a fellow in our office was supposed to catch this one but he seems to have missed it. Come on, I'll give you a lift."

After his first annoyance at Conlon's balloon-pricking, Hildreth was pleased; this would give him a chance to demonstrate his calm. He said as they got into the car, "I can see how you thought I wouldn't be using the place this summer. I'd have been in touch with you sooner about coming up but we've had a little trouble in the cast."

He waited for Conlon to show interest, but the other man only said, "Too bad. Play still going well?"

"Very, thanks."

"I particularly liked—" Conlon turned a sharp corner with care "— the third act. It packs quite a wallop. Are you working on a new play?"

"I am, as a matter of fact, and I thought a little peace and quiet . . . . You know New York," said Hildreth resignedly. In his tone were autograph hunters, sheaves of fan mail, a telephone carrying an invitation with each ring.

And part of it was true. *The Far Cry* was that rarest of things, a hit first play, and the playbill's revelation that it had been eight years in the writing had given an additional fillip. Eight years—what constancy! No wonder that superb third act expertly shivered like a diamond. Here was no glib young creature with a gift for bubbling out dia-

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logue but a major talent who cut his work like a precious stone.

So the critics said, and the important hostesses, and Howard Hildreth, who had been laughed at in this little town, and had his credit refused and his electric light turned off, found his champagne all the winier and forgot those few hours of frantic typing . . .

". . . not a word," Conlon was saying, and Hildreth wrenched his attention from his play, his other self. They were out of the town now, rising into little hills and woodland, puddled and glinted yellowly by a sky which, having rained earlier, was now gloating over it.

Hildreth's mind spun back and recaptured the sense of his companion's words. He said, "Nor I. But I refuse to believe . . . you knew Marian—"

"I think she's dead," said Conlon bluntly without turning his head. "I think she was dead all the time the police were out looking for her."

"But . . . where—?" said Hildreth in a shocked voice.

Conlon waved a hand at the dimming landscape. "There's almost as much water as there is land around here," he said. "Lake, marshes, even quicksand. She had such a horror of things eaten up in the water, remember?"

"Stop!" said Hildreth with genuine violence. "You mustn't talk about her as though— Besides, Marian was happy, she would never have—"

"Committed suicide, or disappeared on purpose?" said Conlon when it was apparent that Hildreth was not going to finish. "Oh, I never thought she had. As you say, I knew Marian . . . here we are."

The car had descended a gentle twisting curve. At the bottom, opposite a stand of birches and set perhaps a hundred feet in from the road, was the pond, as round and clear as a wondering eye, lashed by willows that looked lamplit in the approaching dusk.

On the far side of it, on a slight rise, stood the creamy new structure, the remodeled barn, which six months ago had been weather beaten planks and a wobbly brown-painted door. There was no breath of wind; the house and reflection met themselves in a mirror stillness.

Howard Hildreth gazed, and his heart raced with such horror that he wondered if he was about to have a stroke. He wrenched at his horn-rimmed glasses with a trembling hand, and heard Conlon say curiously, "Are you all right, Howard?"

"Yes. These damned glasses—the doctor warned me that I needed new ones." Even the effort of speaking calmly seemed to put a nutcracker pressure on his heart. "You've done a beautiful job of remodeling the barn, Bill. The photographs you sent didn't do it justice. Shall we go on in?"

The drive up to the house itself was screened by willows. By the

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time Conlon had helped him inside with his bags, Hildreth was able to say almost normally, "Well, here we are. You'll have a drink, won't you?"

Conlon shook his head. He said with a hand on the doorknob, "Sarah—Sarah Wilde, you know—ordered a few essentials for the kitchen, so you ought to get through the night without starving. Well—"

Hildreth did not press him to stay. He said, standing in the open doorway, "These friends of yours that I had to disappoint—do I know them? What's their name?"

"Pocock," said Conlon promptly, and it was so unlikely a name that Hildreth had to believe him. Or was it meant to be a shortened version of poppycock?

He did not even look around at the long studio that took up most of the lower front of the house. He waited tensely for the final retreat of Conlon's motor, and when even the echoes were gone he opened the door and walked the length of the driveway in the lonely frog-sounding dusk.

And there was light enough—just enough—to show him the same sickening apparition. On the far side of the pond stood the new barn, radiantly pale, bearing no resemblance to its former weatherbeaten brown. But at his feet, glassily etched on the surface of the water, lay the old barn, with its knotholes and weatherstains and the wide brown-painted door.

Hildreth drew a long uneven breath. There was no one to see him step squashily to the reed-grown edge of the pond and dip a hand in the icy water. The old barn quaked under the willows, and shook and was presently still again—but it was still the old barn . . .

He did not drink—Marian had—but he took a tranquilizer and headed for his reviews like a child to its mother's skirts. *The Times, Tribune, Daily News,* the out-of-town papers. "Last night at the Odeon Theatre this critic was refreshingly jolted . . ."

"*The Far Cry* is just that in a season so far noted for its weary offerings . . ." "Let us hope we do not have to wait another eight years for the next Hildreth play . . ."

And presently he knew what had happened to him out there at the pond's edge. Auto-suggestion, hallucination—at any rate, there was an accepted term for it, if beauty lay in the beholder's eye, so did other things. He knew what was under that pleasant and pastoral surface, and at the subconscious tension of his mind because Conlon had been with him, his retina had produced the appropriate setting.

But not for Conlon, with all his suspicions—and in retrospect, the man had exuded suspicion. Conlon had looked at the pond and seen nothing amiss; for him, the still water had reflected only his personal creation of shored-up beams

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and plaster and creamy paint and whatever else went into his remodeling of an old structure. The thought gave Hildreth a satisfaction that, keyed up as he was, bordered on triumph.

What a joke on them all, he mused as he broiled the steak Sarah Wilde had left in the refrigerator, if only he, Hildreth, could see this watery witness, gaze at it in their presence, say casually, "Lovely day, isn't it?"—and stand there calmly and casually in the midst of their blindness.

Not that the reflection would be on the pond in the morning. Tonight it had simply been a product of nerves and fatigue, and a good night's sleep would erase it. Still, he was shaken, and he prudently avoided his after-dinner coffee. He darkened the downstairs, flipped on the staircase switch, and went up to his bedroom.

And came face to face with a portrait of Marian which he never knew had been taken.

As the blood came and went from his heart more slowly, he realized that the matted and mounted photograph on the bureau was not a portrait but an enlarged snapshot; on closer inspection it bore a telltale grain and blurriness. It was in color and it showed Marian laughing. There was a halo of sunlight on the close curls that scrambled over her beautifully shaped head, and the same light picked out the comma of mirth beside her mouth although her short, soft, full white throat was in shadow.

Marian laughing . . .

. . . laughing at his play, which she was not supposed to have seen at all until he had written the final word—*Curtain*. Managing to say through the laughter, "My dear playwright, you don't mean to say you've been muddling around with this thing for eight years and missed the whole *point*? It ought to be satire at the end, don't you see, and you fox the audience in the third act instead of this heavy Russian gloom going on and on? It would have such a wonderful, final crack-the-whip effect, and you could get rid of Anna coming in and saying —" she draggled at her hair, which was much too short and curly for draggling "—whatever that long lugubrious speech is."

Her face was brilliant with excited laughter. "Oh, *wait* till I tell Bill and Sarah we've found a way to finish the Odyssey at last! They'll be so—Howard, for heaven's sake, I'm only—*Howar*—"

For such a full throat, it was as soft and weak as a child's . . .

In the morning Hildreth looked at the pond, and the old weather-beaten barn was still there, shaken and distorted under a gently falling rain. Disturbingly, he was not terrified or shocked or even very surprised; it was as though, at some point during his sleep, his brain had

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accepted this phenomenon as readily as the pond had accepted Marian.

After breakfast he made arrangements for renting a car, and then he called Sarah Wilde.

It was through Sarah, who also had an apartment in the building on East Tenth Street, that he had met Marian Guest. Sarah and Marian were copywriters in the same advertising agency, and although Hildreth had a sober loathing of advertising copy and all the people who wrote it—there was a flippancy about them that appalled him—Sarah was well-connected. An aunt of hers was a best-selling novelist, and it had never harmed any hopeful playwright to have even a hearsay acquaintance with a publisher. He had cultivated Sarah in the elevator, lent her an umbrella one day, and ultimately wound up at a party in her apartment.

And there was Marian, sitting on the floor although there were chairs available. She wore black slacks and an expensive-looking white silk shirt with a safety pin where a button should have been, and, profile tilted in the lamplight, she was explaining with zest how she had come by her black eye and scraped cheekbone. She had been walking her dog, George, and had fallen over a sheep on a leash. "The man said it was a Bedlington but he was obviously trying to cover up his own confusion. Poor George bit him, not the man, and I think he's got a hairball."

Although there were two or three other girls present, all with a just-unboxed Madison Avenue attractiveness, the attention seemed to cluster about Marian. She said presently to Howard Hildreth in her boyish and uninhibited voice, "You look terribly broody. What are you hatching?"

"A play," he told her distantly, and it might have been the very distance that attracted her, as it was the attention focused on her that attracted him. At any rate, he ended up taking her home to her apartment on Barrow Street, drinking innumerable cups of black coffee, and telling her about his play. He began challengingly, prepared for amusement when she learned that he had already been working on it for three years; but she listened, her light clear eyes as wide and sober as a child's.

She said, "What do you do—for an income, I mean?"

When he said flatly, "I'm a shoe clerk," she stared past him with a kind of wondering sadness.

"How marvelous," she had said, "to give that much of a damn about anything."

There was Marian, summed up in a single sentence; even after they were married she never told him anything as self-revelatory as that. And under the influence of her respect for his dedication, his work, which had always been his Work to him, was able to come out in the

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open with its capital letter. Until she had defected—

But Hildreth had learned to discipline his mind, and he did it now.

He said into the telephone, "Sarah? I'm an ingrate for not calling you last night to tell you how much I like the way you've done the place—as well as providing my dinner—but . . ."

Sarah Wilde cut him off easily. "Do you like it? I'm glad. It's rather a lot of lavender, but you did specify—"

"Yes," Hildreth gazed, secretly entertained, at the lavender draperies, the lavender cushions, round and square and triangular, piled on the black tweed couch. Lavender—Marian's favorite color. Any doubters close to Marian could not help saying to themselves, "Well, if he can live with that . . ."

"It's very soothing," he said to Sarah with the defensive air of a husband standing up for his wife's vagaries. "Very restful. I like the picture on my bureau, by the way."

It was as though the telephone cord had been pulled taut between them. "It is a good one, isn't it? I took it—oh, some time last summer, I think, and I'd forgotten all about it until Bill Conlon happened to see it and thought you'd like an enlargement."

"It was very thoughtful of you both," said Hildreth with perfect evenness. "That's the way I think of her, you know. Laughing. I suppose Bill's told you that I haven't given up hope."

"Of course you haven't," said Sarah, bright and artificial.

Between them, in the small silence that followed, lay the many trips that he and Conlon had taken to view unidentified female bodies which corresponded even roughly with Marian's age and height. It was grim work, which helped; he was always a thoroughly pale and shaken man. And with each fruitless trip, because of the very nature of such an errand, the official belief that Marian Hildreth was dead had grown. Hildreth could tell that Sarah believed it too—in which, of course, she was quite right.

She was veering quickly away from the subject now, saying something about dinner this week. Hildreth accepted for Thursday evening, adding with a deprecating little laugh that he trusted it wouldn't be an Occasion; he'd come up here to get started on his new play.

"No, just two or three people," Sarah assured him. "I did tell you, didn't I, how much I liked *The Far Cry*? I thought I knew what was coming in the third act, but it was one time I loved being made a fool of."

Hildreth thanked her, a trifle aloofly, and there was not the smallest alarm along his nerves. He suspected that Sarah and Conlon, mere acquaintances six months ago, would be married before the year was out, but the fact that they had

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undoubtedly seen the play together didn't matter. They could not say, "That last act sounds like Marian," because as far as they knew Marian had never laid eyes on the script—she had said wryly, in fact, two or three days before that last night, "Howard thinks I'll mark his baby, like a gypsy . . ."

(What a very tellable joke it would have been, what an irresistible nugget for gossip columns, because Marian's was not a secret-keeping nature: that Howard Hildreth had toiled unremittingly over his play for eight years, and in the space of a single hour his wife, who had never written anything but tongue-in-cheek praise of vinyl tile and slide fasteners, had off-handedly supplied the satirical twist that made it a success.)

Even at the thought Hildreth felt a qualm of nausea. Although his portable typewriter stood ready on the desk at the far end of the studio, with a fresh ream of yellow paper beside it, he let himself out the front door into the falling rain and walked to the pond's edge. There was the old barn, shaking dimly under the falling drops, and he knew that in some terrible way he was drawing strength from this private vision, locked under the willows for his eyes, and apparently for his alone . . .

A notion of incipient madness slid across his mind, but he looked quickly about him and everything else was sane and clear. If Marian thought to retaliate after death . . .

He drew himself up sharply.

In the afternoon he was gracious to the editor of the local newspaper, with the result that his favorite publicity picture appeared in the next morning's issue. He was holding his horn-rimmed glasses with one earpiece casually collapsed, and the three-quarter turn of his head almost concealed the double chin developed since those lean days.

". . . seeking inspiration for his new play," said the account below, proudly, and, "Residents will recall the still-unresolved disappearance of Mrs. Marian Hildreth six months ago. Mrs. Hildreth, 38, told her husband late on the evening of October 4, 1963, that she was going out for a walk. She did not return, and no trace of her has since been found. Mr. Hildreth maintains his staunch belief that his wife is still alive, possibly suffering from a loss of memory . . ."

Hildreth read with calm pleasure the rest of the telling—how the pond on the property had been dragged without result. The police had indeed dragged it over his demurs—"Oh, come now, she wouldn't fall into a pond she's lived beside for five years"—and then came the heavily tactful, "Mr. Hildreth, your wife wasn't—er . . .?"

Because Marian's more madcap exploits were not unknown to the local police. They viewed her with a tolerant and even an indulgent

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eye—that was the effect she had on people; but under the circumstances they could not rule out a tragic and alcoholic whim.

"No," Hildreth had said with transparent stoutness. "Oh, she may have had a highball or two after dinner . . ."

He knew, he had known at the moment of her death, that the marital partner was usually Suspect Number One. But that had not actually held true in little Ixton, Connecticut. If there had been any whisper of discord, any suggestion of dalliance by either party, any prospect of inheriting money—or even if Marian's life had been insured—the police might have looked deeper than they did. As it was, they walked past the burlaped yew, the burlaped roses, Marian's burlaped body, and then announced that they would drag the pond.

This procedure netted them two ancient inner tubes, a rotted and hinged object which had once been the hood of a convertible, and a rust-fretted oil drum which seemed to have spawned a great many beer cans. If the police had returned at just after dark, when one particular piece of burlap among the yews had been lifted free of its stiffened secret, and the secret transferred to the now officially blameless water . . . but, predictably, they had not.

They could have no further reason for dragging the pond now—indeed, thought Hildreth, they would need a warrant. And for a warrant they would need evidence.

That was the safety element in a spur-of-the-moment murder. The cleverest planners—Hildreth rejected the word killers—had come to grief over elaborate timetables, unsuspected correspondence, a hint of fear dropped somewhere. There could be none of that in this case. Neither he nor Marian had known what was coming until that moment of her crowing laughter, that intolerable tearing-down of the secrecy and seriousness of his Work.

It was not so much that Marian had burst the bonds of curiosity and somehow contrived to unlock the desk drawer which housed his script, nor even that she had slipped at least temporarily into the ranks of the people who found him clownishly amusing. It was that she was right. Like someone engaged on a painstaking tapestry, he had been following stitch after stitch and lost sight of the pattern, which had leaped at once to Marian's unbothered and mischievous eye.

It was as if . . . he could not say at the time, because his logic had smoked away like cellophane in a flame. Later, more calmly, he could compare himself to a woman who, after a long and difficult labor, watches the doctor merrily bearing the infant off to his own home.

But there was no evidence, and he would not be tricked or trapped. His visit here—the first since the five weeks or so after he had reported Marian missing—would pro-

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claim his innocence. Not to the police—he wasn't worried about them—but to Bill Conlon and Sarah Wilde, the only people who, close to Marian, might just possibly . . .

Hildreth arranged yellow paper beside his uncovered typewriter in the white-walled lavender-and-black studio, but he did not, that morning or the next or the one after that, commence even the roughest work on a new play.

He told himself defensively that he had spent several months under considerable strain; a man didn't bounce back from that right away. And critical success was paralyzing in itself: there was the inevitable restudying of the first work in search of the magic ingredient, and the equally inevitable fear of comparison with a second.

At no time did he allow it to cross his mind that there were one-play playwrights as there were one-book novelists, and that his one play would still be in various stages of rewriting except for Marian's unruly wit. But there was a moment when, seated blankly at the typewriter, he thought, *Do I look like the pond?* and got up and crossed the room to examine himself in a mirror.

But no; he hadn't changed at all in spite of his damp little tremor of fright. And if he could see the truth on the pond's surface, surely he could see it on his own? There was the gained weight, granted, but his dark eyes gave back their old serious look, his eyebrows were forbiddingly level, a lock of hair—now pampered by his New York barber—still hung with dedication.

But when he stared long enough and hard enough, moving his face to within an inch or two of the mirror, tiny little Howard Hildreths peeked out of the pupils, and behind them—

Ah, behind *them* . . .

He developed a kind of triumphant passion for the pond. He watched it ballooned with clouds, or covered with nervous little wrinkles under a sudden wind. He saw the weatherbeaten planks and the brown door warp and fly to pieces under the miniature tidal waves caused by water bugs or perhaps frogs. Pretending to enjoy a cigarette in the course of a stroll, he took note of the passing cars that slowed for an admiring view of the clean creamy little house behind the willowed pond, and no car jerked to a shocked halt, no one screamed.

Hildreth had a Polaroid camera, and one afternoon, in a fascinated test, he took a picture of the pond. Conlon's photographs had shown no abnormality, but this time it was he who was pressing the shutter. The day warranted color film—the willows dripped and candled about the round eye of water, enameled so perfectly that it might have been a brooch.

Wouldn't it be odd, thought Hil-

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dreth, counting excitedly to sixty, if only the camera and I—?

He was peeling the paper shield away when Sarah Wilde's voice said at his shoulder, "Oh, may I see?"

The print and its fluttering attachment dropped to the ground. Hildreth got only a swinging glimpse of Sarah's slanted white cheek, caught only the beginning of the rueful, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—" before he bent, barely circumventing her; if necessary he would have put his shoe on the print.

As it was, he snatched it up and turned away, manufacturing a cough, while he finished stripping the shield. He said a second later, turning back, "Not bad, is it?" and handed the innocent color print to Sarah. No, not the camera and himself—only himself.

Sarah, he thought watchfully, was a remarkably beautiful young woman. Her dropped lashes were a thick unretouched silver-brown, her polished hair a slightly deeper brown; her gaze, when she lifted it, would be gray. With the suave red of her lipstick to counterpoint the water-color effect, she was quietly startling in any gathering.

"Very good indeed," she said, handing the print back by its edges. "The pond's so pretty, isn't it? Especially now."

She glanced at the circle of water and then back at Hildreth, who following her gaze had still seen the placidly mirrored old barn. A trembling of nerves ran along his throat. To control a wild impulse toward laughter he said in a considering, landownerish way, "It seems quite full, but you've had heavy rains this month, haven't you?" and he slid the print casually into his coat pocket.

"Yes, it is full," said Sarah in his own considering tone, and there was no doubt about it; the eyes that moved from the pond to his face held some kind of—doubt? Challenge? Hildreth said coolly, "Well, if you'll excuse me, it's back to the typewriter," and he took a step away.

"Wait, I almost forgot what I came for." Sarah was dipping into her calf handbag. "Here—the mailman put this in my box instead of yours. Wonderful to get fan mail. Don't forget about dinner tonight—cocktails at six thirty."

It wasn't fan mail which Hildreth opened when the red Volkswagen had disappeared over the hill, but one of the many letters which, the police had told him, always arrived in the wake of a disappearance. This one was from *Someone Who Can Help,* and in exchange for $200 mailed to an enclosed box number in Vermont the writer would put him in touch with his missing wife.

The maddening part of these communications was that they could not be ignored—at least, not by a man in whom hope supposedly sprang eternal. Hildreth, sitting

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down to write the form reply that thanked the writer and said he was turning the letter over to the officers in charge of the investigation, thought angrily that there ought to be a law.

The afternoon passed slowly. Conlon telephoned to say that there would be a plumber coming over to do something to the downstairs bath, and Hildreth said pettishly, "Really, Bill, forgive me, but I thought all that had been taken care of. One doesn't greet plumbers in the middle of Scene One, you know."

He was mollified a little later by a delegation from the local high-school magazine, asking humbly for a "Best Wishes from Howard Hildreth" to be photostated for the graduation issue. One of the shiny-haired wide-eyed girls ventured close to his typewriter, in which Hildreth foresightedly kept a typed yellow sheet—the opening scene of *The Far Cry*—and he said at once, austerely, "Please don't—I have a 'thing' about work in progress."

It only added to their awe. But he had had it, thought Hildreth, presently seeing them to the door; he had had all the local adulation he wanted. Imperiously buying delicacies at the only market that carried them, he had seen the fawning face of the manager who only a year ago had told him that if his bill wasn't settled promptly he would find himself in the small-claims court.

He had been pointed out respectfully on the main street, and had declined invitations from the town's reigning hostess. More importantly, he had been accepted everywhere without a trace of suspicion; if there was any sentiment in the air, it was one of embarrassed pity for a man who so courageously continued to hope.

In a day or two he could go back to New York, having established to Bill Conlon and Sarah Wilde and everybody else that there was no question of his selling or even renting the property with its pretty, deadly pond.

He was all the more shocked, in the midst of these comfortable reflections, when at a little after three he had a call from a Sergeant Fisk at the police station. Some little girls looking for pussywillows in a field on the outskirts of the town had discovered a woman's leather handbag and part of a dress with some suggestive stains; would Hildreth please come down and see if he could identify them?

"Certainly," said Hildreth, staring angrily out the window. "Of course, being out in the weather, I imagine they're pretty well—?"

"No, sir, they were stuffed in the remains of an old stone wall and they're still in fair condition. Recognizable, anyway."

"I'll leave right away," said Hildreth, tempering his eagerness with the right amount of dread.

At the police station he was asked

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to wait—Sergeant Fisk would be right with him.

By four o'clock Sergeant Fisk still was not with him; at four thirty, fuming, Hildreth walked up to the uniformed man at the switchboard and said sharply, "I came here at the request of Sergeant Fisk to look at some objects for identification, and I cannot wait any longer. Please leave a message—"

"Just a minute, sir," said the policeman unruffledly, and slipped a plug into its socket and inquired for Sergeant Fisk. "There's a Mr. Hildreth here, been waiting since —okay, I'll tell him to go right in."

But the handbag and dress fragment, when Hildreth reached Sergeant Fisk's office, had been transferred to Lieutenant Martin's office, where there was some question as to their possible connection with the vanishing of a Colorado couple making a cross-country tour four months ago. Hildreth contained his temper as he went with the sergeant to Martin's office; he was, he remembered, a man who would do anything to find a clue to his wife's fate.

He was badly tempted when, at after five o'clock, he surveyed a rotted and mildewed navy calf handbag, empty, and the sleeve and half the bodice of what had once been a yellow wool dress. Why not say, "Yes, they're my wife's," and bury his face in his hands and be done with it?

Because, he thought with a feeling of having stepped back from the edge of a cliff, Marian had never worn yellow—she said it made her look like a two-legged hangover; and there was a suggestion of something on the leather lining of the bag that could easily be a nearly obliterated name or monogram. Hildreth had read what modern police laboratories could do with things like that. So he shook his head and said, "They're not my wife's," and with a shudder at the stains on the rotting yellow wool, "Thank God."

Three hours, he thought as he drove home seething in the rainy dusk; three hours on a fool's errand which he could not have risked refusing. Just barely time to dress for dinner at Sarah Wilde's —and then get out of here, tomorrow.

He was restored at the thought, and at the glimpse of the old barn quivering on the pond in the last of the light as he drove to Sarah's. His temper was further improved by Sarah's big casually gay living room—two rooms thrown together in a very old saltbox—and the contrast between an open fire and a cold rattling rain on the windows.

The other guests were already established with drinks—Conlon, a Mr. and Mrs. Slater, and Mrs. Slater's decorative visiting sister.

Hildreth thawed, physically and temperamentally. He felt a slight jar of recognition when he was introduced to the Slaters, but he had

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undoubtedly encountered them on the station platform at some forgotten time, or in a local store. He noted with approval that Sarah had obviously got someone in for the evening, because there were sounds of kitchen activity while Sarah sat on the couch, in black and pearls, beside Conlon.

On the rare occasions when he and Marian had entertained, Marian had charged in and out like a demented puppy, crying, "My God, who's been watching the beans? Nobody!" Or, abashedly, "We all like nutmeg instead of pepper in our mashed potatoes, don't we?"

Sarah had turned her head and was gazing at him; somebody had clearly asked a question. Hildreth used a handkerchief on his suddenly damp forehead and temples and said, "I got wetter than I thought —that's really quite a downpour," and he got up to stand by the fire.

And the bad moment was gone, further wiped out by Sarah's "You said you mightn't be here long on this visit, Howard, so we're having your favorite dinner—you know, what you won't eat in restaurants."

"Don't tell me . . .?" said Hildreth, delighted, but it was: trout, a crisp deep-gold outside, succulent white within, delicately enhanced by herbs that only hinted at themselves. He ate with deliberate pleasure, not succumbing until close to the end of dinner to his habit of providing backgrounds for people.

The extraordinarily good-looking sister from New Haven— her name was Vivian Hughes— seemed the kind of young woman who, convinced in her teens that she could have any man she wanted, had ended up with none; there was a kind of forced grace to the frequent turn of her head, and lines of discontent around her really striking green eyes.

Mrs. Slater wasn't a fair test, because she had ticketed herself earlier by a reference to the young twins they had left with a baby-sitter, and by her very casualness she had given herself away. She was the new and on the whole the best breed of mother, thought Hildreth approvingly; slender, amiable, intelligent, she kept her maternal dotings strictly for hearth and home.

Slater? Hildreth gazed obliquely through candlelight at the other man, perhaps a year or two younger than his own forty. The lean, polished, ruddy face suggested an outdoorsman, but everything else pointed to an executive. He went on gazing, and like an exposed print washed gently back and forth in developer, outlines began to emerge.

A desk, not executive-grain but scarred oak. Two telephones on it. A uniformed man in a far doorway saying, "Yes, sir, right away," then disappearing down one of a warren of corridors.

Yes, Slater was a police officer of some sort, or a detective, glimpsed or perhaps even talked to in the

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first stages of the investigation six months ago. And Sarah and Conlon hoped that he would be terrified by this recognition, and go to pieces. That was the whole point of this friendly little gathering.

How very disappointed they must be. Hildreth stirred his coffee tranquilly, because no motive for murder had existed until sixty seconds before Marian died, and there wasn't a single clue. In an enjoyment of the attention he now knew to be trained on him he said in a well-fed voice, "Marvelous dinner, Sarah. I don't know when I've had trout like that," and Sarah said, "As a matter of fact, you never have."

She was leaning forward a little in the candlelight, her gaze cool and removed. "The trout were from your pond, Howard, and they were caught this afternoon while you were down at the police station. You didn't know that Marian had had the pond stocked for you, as a birthday present, just before she—disappeared, because you love trout but never trust it in restaurants. We didn't know about it either until the friend who did it for her stopped by to see Bill a couple of weeks ago."

Hildreth's neck felt caught in one of those high white collars you saw on injured people; he could not turn it even when he heard Conlon's, "Nice fat trout, I thought, but lazy. They bit at anything."

. . . while he had sat in the police station, decoyed there by a telephone call.

"You all ate it," said Hildreth triumphantly, in a candlelight that had begun to tremble and dampen his face. "You all—"

"No. Ours was perch from the Old Town Fish Market," said Sarah, and although she continued to hold his gaze, her forehead had a cold glimmer and her mouth seemed clenched against a scream.

Hildreth lost them all then. He dropped his eyes, but instead of his dessert cup he saw his dinner plate, with the neat spiny bones from which all the succulent white flesh had been forked away. Marian's soft white throat, and the busy, inquisitive, nibbling mouths at the bottom of the pond, and the plump things placed on his plate—

He heard his chair go crashing back, and the gagging cry of horror that issued from his own throat as he plunged blindly for somewhere to be sick; and, from a mist, Slater's voice saying, ". . . looks like it. Very definitely. We'll get at it first thing in the morning. . . ."

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Another heart-warming human-interest detective story by William Fay . . . about Fogarty, ex-cop and struggling young lawyer, recently defeated for public office, and Sarah Kearney, a beautiful young heiress —and about faith, that priceless ingredient without which no detective, amateur or professional, is worth his salt . . .

NEVER KILL A COP

by WILLIAM FAY

WHEN FOGARTY GOT TO HIS OFfice at half-past ten in the morning, carrying his breakfast in a paper bag, the door was unexpectedly unlatched. A girl named Sarah Kearney sat in the client's chair next to his desk, looking at him with what he at first interpreted as blithe superiority. It was no way to look at Fogarty in his present mood or at this stage of his new career.

"Good morning, counselor," Miss Kearney said.

"How are you?" His response was cautious. It was the first time they had met to speak in several years, or since the occasion when, as a policeman, he had almost locked her up for obstructing traffic willfully. "Do you carry a set of keys?" he said. "Or do you float over transoms like cigar smoke?"

"The superintendent let me in. I told him I had been sitting on the stairs for forty minutes." She looked at him joylessly. "Your paper bag is dripping," she said.

"Let it drip."

He didn't wish to be unpleasantly hostile, but she was here, like some polished apple out of Eden, and Fogarty, a principled man, felt entitled to self-defense. He found that his pride, much more than his privacy, was being dynamited by her presence. He had a container of coffee and a jelly doughnut in the bag. The tilted container was partly empty now and the doughnut looked like a wet, soggy softball.

It punished him to know she'd had the opportunity to gape around his office and conclude from firsthand evidence that, in addition to being a recently defeated candidate for public office, he was strictly a five-and-ten-cent counselor-at-law. The do-it-yourself testimony of a paint can in one corner and his old pants on a hook did not indicate prosperity any more than did his obvious lack of a secretary. He

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dropped the soggy doughnut into a receptacle.

"You care for some coffee?"

"No, thank you, Joe."

It seemed to him she had a nerve to call him "Joe," as though he were still a cop on the corner of Main and Sheridan Streets and she was breezing by in one of her old man's Mohawk V's, those six-to-eight thousand-dollar items (f.o.b. Detroit), for which they had the exclusive agency in town. He felt like reminding her that a man doesn't go to college and law school for a couple of thousand nights to have some dumpling, after years of nose-in-the-air indifference, give him that "Joe" stuff with a patronizing smile.

"I suppose you came here for a reason?"

"A perfectly legitimate one," she said. Then, very seriously, "Angelo Amato is in trouble."

Fogarty leaned forward, resting his arms on the desk. Something prompted him to say the next, unnecessary thing. "Before you go any further, I'm on Angelo's side."

She looked at him coolly. "Don't be so aggressive."

"I'll be what I have to be."

"Just because you lost an election," she said.

"Never mind the election."

Her simple statement, "Angelo Amato is in trouble," was a phrase he hadn't heard in a long, almost forgotten time. Angelo, who worked for the Kearney Mohawk Agency, was an ex-petty hoodlum, long reformed. Fogarty would not deny that Angelo had a hold on his affections that a Stillson wrench or a bond of blood could not more firmly secure.

"What kind of trouble is Angelo in?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't tell me."

"Then how do you know he's in any trouble at all?"

"The way he looked, the way he acted when he came in at half-past eight this morning. He was pale as bread and I'm sure he hadn't slept. He'd cut himself below the elbow of his right arm and there was a soiled bandage around it. I tried to send him home."

"Are you running the agency now?"

"In my father's absence, yes. He's in New Mexico on vacation."

"Is that so?" Fogarty said. As a man of disciplined good manners, he did not suggest it was a good place for her father to be—out where the Indians might teach him to keep his big mouth shut—especially in matters of local politics. "Tell me more about Angelo," he said. "Couldn't the guy just have had a bad night? Tied one on?"

"It wasn't that simple. He was troubled and evasive. All he said was 'I'll go to see Fogarty, but not right now.' He doesn't know I'm here, but that's why I came. I called his wife on your phone, if you'll forgive me. All Rose did was weep

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and fail to make sense. Now—is that my imagining?"

"M'm-m," said Fogarty. "I don't like this at all."

"He'll talk to you. The Lord knows why, but you're the only hero Angelo has. The least you could do is come back to the shop."

"I can't go now. I'm going over to Maxim's Funeral Home—pay my respects to the cop who got killed out on Manion Road."

"You mean Eddie Bernstein?"

"That's right. Bernstein, the detective. He was a friend of mine. I worked with him when he was a patrolman."

"What about Angelo?"

"I'll see him later," Fogarty said. "It's hard to explain. You could call it an ex-cop's intuition, but I don't think I should go to see him at your place, unless he suggested it."

"Why not?"

"Let's put it this way," Fogarty said. "Since Angelo is all we have in common, let's agree that he didn't rob a bank or slug anybody on the head. Now, if he's in the only kind of trouble I can even imagine him being in, it might not help to have it appear as though he's been looking around for me. Did he mention any of the crowd he was mixed up with years ago? Frank Savarese, for instance? Any of the others?"

"But you know that he doesn't see them."

"Does that mean they couldn't see Angelo?"

"Well, no; I suppose that's conceivable. And from the way Rose carried on, perhaps it could be."

"Where does Angelo go to lunch these days?"

"O'Mara's place, on Bridge Street, most of the time."

"Tell him I'll meet him there at half-past twelve."

"Thank you," Sarah Kearney said.

"No thanks at all." He watched her stand up. She was tall and she was a queen and she was handsomer now than she had been in their high-school days, when the sight of her used to flip his heart like a dish. "You're not as fresh or as hard to get along with as you used to be," he said kindly. "It's a great improvement."

"I'd punch you in the nose," she said, very calmly, "if it weren't for Angelo."

He left the funeral home a few minutes after twelve. The rabbi and most of Bernstein's relatives shook solemn hands with him. He had made one brief, rehearsed speech to the widow, but his voice had cracked and his eyes had filled. He didn't think he should try again.

A cop named Finley stood in the lobby, well apart from the rest, quietly saying his beads. Fogarty walked over.

"Tough, isn't it, Joe?" said Finley. "At a time like this?"

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"It's always tough, Al," Fogarty agreed. "You know anything more? More than that he got clipped by a car?"

"He got sideswiped, Joe—clean, dainty, deadly."

"I heard that much. What else have you got?"

"A handful of glass from a headlight. There's only one and a half million headlights like it in the state."

"Eddie wasn't on duty, was he?"

"He was off last night. It was like they had it in this morning's paper. His own car was parked ten or fifteen feet from the call box on Manion Road. No call came through, but the phone was danglin' from the box when Eddie was picked up off the road. That could make you think of a lot of strange things, but you know as much as I do, Joe."

"I'll see you, Al."

Outside it was late and bare November. The wind was rocking the leafless trees. Fogarty buttoned his coat. He put his hands in his pockets.

A pale-toned, Pullman-sized, quite beautiful convertible had stopped at the curb outside the funeral home. It was a Mohawk V. The motor was idling. The twin exhausts raised little clouds like profane incense to the memory of Bernstein.

Fogarty walked around to the far side of the car, where the driver's fat arm rested on the door.

"Is this a gag?" Fogarty asked.

"You want somethin', Joey?" the driver said.

"I want you to get out of here."

"You bought the whole street, Joey? It's yours?"

Frank Savarese was an important man. This was an opinion shared by friendly critics as well as by those who believed he should be in jail. A huge man, in his forties, hard-fleshed, fairly trim, and bolder at times than he was bright, he owned the Beach and Country Club, on Davis Neck, the greenest, best bit of real estate within the limits of Sound City, New York.

Fogarty could have told you that he also owned the mayor of the town, half the city council, and the zoning board that permitted him to operate on Davis Neck in the disguise and sanctuary of a "private" club.

Frank Savarese's club was so private it enjoyed the luxury of its own police force—three cops with badges, in letter carrier's gray, hired by the day from a New York City agency. Thus, by virtual ordinance, the Beach and Country Club was out of bounds for the Sound City police.

"You're going to tell me you were fond of Bernstein?" Fogarty asked.

"I got my receipt for the flowers, Joey. I'm entitled to see if they got delivered."

"If you put a foot inside that chapel," said Fogarty, "I can tell you right now there's a cop in there

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who will throw you through a wall."

"You scare me, Joey."

"I'm not surprised," said Fogarty, "because, when you come to think of it, I always did."

He walked toward Main Street slowly, thoughtfully. He got to O'Mara's Municipal Tavern at half-past twelve. He didn't see Angelo Amato. He saw a union delegate and a painter named Lew, seated at the luncheon counter, eating boiled beef and sauerkraut, the special of the day. Fogarty went to the bar on the opposite side and O'Mara drew a beer for him.

Fogarty waited, licking foam from the glass, until a couple of cops came in. They waved to him and sat down with the painter and the union delegate. Fogarty walked over and said to one of them, "You happen to have seen Angelo Amato?"

"Who?"

"Angelo," he repeated. "Angelo Amato."

"They just took the poor guy to the hospital, Joe, with a lump on his head the size of your fist."

"They took him from where?"

"From Kearney's place, where he works. Two strangers walked in off the street while he had his head under the hood of a car. They were quick and they nearly killed him."

Fogarty walked down a broad, sound-cushioned corridor in the Sound City Hospital, not having gained admittance to Room 507. The nurse on duty had said, "No visitors." The waiting rooms were straight ahead.

There was a cop taking information from an intern. Fogarty joined them. Beyond, in one of the waiting rooms, he could see Sarah Kearney and a gentleman friend of hers named Charles Nestor Forbes, a civic leader. *A jerk,* he thought, and then disliked himself. *It could be that I'm just a jealous slob;* and it was strange, strange that this might possibly be true.

"We don't know the extent of the injury," the intern said. "He's unconscious now. Whether there's a skull fracture or a serious trauma, I don't know. You'll have to speak to Doctor Theiss. Excuse me."

The cop kept writing. Fogarty remained there, looking over his shoulder, reading the notes on the pad. "Was he conscious when they brought him in?" he asked.

"Not when they brought him in, Joe. But after the beatin' he was. Miss Kearney says so, and she knows more about it than me. How do you spell 'trauma'?"

"Tee-ar-aye-yew-em-aye," Fogarty said. He walked into the waiting room and said, "Charles, my good man," with great formality to Charles Nestor Forbes who looked surprised.

Charles was as tall as a leaping stork. He was thin and his hair was cropped like a well-kept lawn. He looked very Ivy League and he had money in the bank. He was, with

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Sarah's old man, a member of the League for Independent Voters. In the recent election he had regretfully stated that Fogarty was "too inexperienced and ignescent" to merit the league's support as a city councilman. He also took Sarah Kearney to dances and public picnics.

"And how are you, Joe?" he inquired.

"I'm ignescent, Charles." Fogarty struck a match to light a cigarette. "I even know what it means."

Now, within the waiting room, he saw Rose Amato. She was seated, her hands folded on the glossy surface of a magazine, her cheeks like chalk, her dark eyes raised to Fogarty.

"Pray for him, Joe."

"He'll be all right." The lump came up in Fogarty's throat—widows, orphans, mothers in distress; he had no defense—never had.

"Don't ask me any questions, Joe."

"Look, Rose, sometimes you've got to face things," Fogarty said. "Sometimes you can't afford to be scared."

"Please. Please, Joe."

He dragged more deeply on his cigarette. Sarah signaled for his attention. Charles Nestor Forbes sat down. Fogarty followed Sarah into the other waiting room.

"You saw it happen at the shop?" he said.

"I didn't see it. I was in the showroom. The men got away, as you know. Angelo was conscious for a little while. He said he'd only had a glimpse of the men and that he had never seen them before. He said to tell Rose not to worry about the family, since they had taken it out on him, whatever it was. Then he passed out. It was frightful, the beating he had to take."

"Who's with the kids now?"

"Rose's sister—until I get there. Who could have done this to them, Joe? You've some idea, haven't you?"

"I've always got ideas," he said, "but you can't depend on them. What I have in mind is too simple, too convenient. How much do you think Rose knows?"

"More than she has admitted," Sarah Kearney said. "And far more than you should try to force out of her now."

Fogarty left the hospital and went to the office. He opened the mail he had neglected earlier and found a $50 fee that he had not expected to collect. He went downstairs to the drug store and had a sandwich.

He wondered again if Sarah's visit to his office could have contributed to the beating of Angelo Amato. Assuming that Angelo was in some way involved with his old companions, would not her hasty visit to his office be evidence that Angelo was on the verge of howling "cop"? Couldn't Sarah have been followed?

He got up from his seat at the

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counter. It was almost four o'clock. He paid the man and dialed Angelo's number from a coin booth. It was Sarah who answered the phone.

"It's me," he said. "Fogarty, the people's choice. Is everything all right out there?"

"Everything's all right, except that I'm not used to cooking with olive oil or letting children nibble on Italian salami."

"I mean—well, is there anybody else with you?"

"Why should there be?"

"I'm the nervous type," said Fogarty. "I think maybe there should be someone there. I'll come out myself."

"If you insist on being dramatic," she said, "you can pick up a loaf of bread. One of those yard-long jobs at Danetti's."

Fogarty, having sold his car to raise campaign funds, took a cab.

"Thanks for the bread," she said. "My compliments."

She wore an apron not equal to the excellent length of her. It looked like a bib. The sleeves of her dress had been rolled back to the elbows. There was tomato paste on her arm.

"Come in," she said. "You'll freeze out the house."

He came in the side entrance, closing the door behind him. There were four small Amatos, three of them self-propelled. The fourth was in a playpen, blessedly asleep.

"That's young Armand," Sarah said. "He's seven months old."

"I'm the kid's godfather," Fogarty said. "You're telling me?"

Angelo's house was on the fringe of town, out past the city ball field and the last bus stop. As it had been all day, the wind was big, aggressive. The afternoon light began to fade. A shutter banged. The shadows cast by the wide arms of a chestnut tree were rhythmic and foreboding. Night would come early. The driveway at the side of the house was empty. The garage looked empty too.

"How did you get out here?" Fogarty asked.

"Charles drove me out. He's coming back for me."

"Did you hear from Rose?"

"She phoned from the hospital."

"Yes?"

"To say we needed bread. I told her you were in charge of the bread. She said, *'Madre mia'*; she was glad you were coming out. I guess it could get a little creepy."

"What about Angelo?"

"He seems to be resting well. I talked to the nurse. X-rays showed the fracture wasn't too severe. They're only worried about internal bleeding."

Fogarty sat in a tufted chair. Dominic, John, and Mary Amato—seven, five and three years old—stood close by, watching him. He gave them each a dime and a VOTE FOR FOGARTY button, his picture framed within the circle of the lettering.

"Here, you can have one too," he

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said to Sarah Kearney. "They're always cheaper after election."

"Thank you. I'll pin it on Charles. If you'll excuse us, we're going to have our baths."

"You too?"

"Don't be cute. Just keep your eye on Armand."

It was no problem minding Armand. Fogarty read the *Sound City Call,* an afternoon daily, but was not enlightened. The darkness had long been with them. Traffic was light on the road that passed the house. Once in a while he'd see the headlights sweep around the turn, then "whoof!"; they drove that fast.

Sarah came downstairs with three scrubbed, aromatic, and pajamaed Amatos. She fed them in the kitchen. Fogarty stood in the doorway, watching her.

"So?" she said.

"I didn't say anything."

"Then be useful. Get Armand."

"He's asleep."

"He isn't now. I heard him."

Fogarty got Armand and brought him into the kitchen. Sarah sent the three others into the living room, where she served their dessert, and Dominic turned on the television. Sarah returned to the kitchen. Armand was squirming and Armand was damp.

"Give him to me," she said, "in heaven's name, before you strangle the lamb."

"He doesn't smell like a lamb. He smells like a sheep."

"Humph," she said. "A funny man. A funny, funny, funny man." She changed and powdered and began to feed the youngest Amato. She looked at Fogarty. "What's that you've got?"

"It's a map," he said. "A police map of the city. Here, where I'm pointing, is where we are now. Forget it. I'm interested in the opposite end of town—over here on Long Island Sound. Follow the pencil—this is Savarese's Beach and Country Club."

"I believe you," she said, "but I don't want to stick the spoon in the baby's eye. This has to do with Angelo?"

"With Angelo, maybe. But first with Eddie Bernstein. As I think I mentioned, this is strictly a dream; it would occur to a moron, but you have to begin with something. I'll begin by believing in Angelo. A guy doesn't live the way he's been living for years and then take off like a two-dollar burglar. I say if he's in trouble, the trouble came to him, and that could be Frank Savarese."

"Go on," she said.

"Last night, sometime around midnight, Eddie Bernstein got clipped by a speeding car. Nobody saw it, but he was trying to phone from the police call box on Manion Road. His own car was parked near the call box. He wasn't on duty.

"Suppose he was out to Savarese's place and was snooping around out there before he was discovered. You know they've got their own special

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police. Real 'special,' I can tell you —a regular cop needs a warrant and a squad of marines to get any place at all.

"But suppose Eddie got real lucky. Suppose he came up with something the mayor, the zoning board or all of Savarese's money couldn't fix. A free-wheeling crap game that would cost him his liquor license, or the wrong kind of dames —the 'private-party' type our cops could toss in the wagon. Now, if you look at this map, you'll see that while it's a mile away, the call box on Manion Road is the first one Bernstein could have got to. What wouldn't Savarese have done to stop him?"

"I see what you mean."

"About Angelo. Putting aside our personal feelings, you know as well as I do that he was mixed up with Savarese. When he was a kid he used to drive a car for the bum and pick up horse bets for him all over town.

"That's where I caught up with him. He was collecting slips from twenty candy and cigar stores. He was also repairing slot machines. Savarese wasn't such a fancy fellow then. He needed a good mechanic. What I'm trying to say right now is that he might have needed one last night."

"To repair a car, of course."

"A fender, a headlight, whatever it was that needed to be fixed—quickly, cleanly, professionally—not at your shop, but here—and off the record, in a way the cops couldn't check."

"Angelo wouldn't do it."

"Let's not be too pious," Fogarty said. "You don't know what leverage might have been used. And if it involved Eddie Bernstein, the chances are that Angelo wouldn't have known until this morning. You said yourself that he was coming to see me about whatever trouble he was in. Well, didn't you?"

"I told you exactly what he said."

"Well, then, it's good enough for me. We'll see."

He watched her remove the strained green beans and carrots from the features of Armand Amato. There was perspiration on her nose. A great passion swelled in Fogarty at the sight of such wholesomeness.

"You used to be so darned uppity," he said. "In high school, for instance."

"In high school, really? How would you know? I always thought we were of different generations."

"You were two years behind me," Fogarty said. "You're almost as old as I am."

She pushed back her hair. "That's a crime, I suppose?"

"It's no crime. But it's a waste. You were never meant to be an old maid."

"Mind your business," she told him.

Fogarty laughed. "It's a topic that interests me. How is it you never married Charles?"

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"Who said I won't?"

"I say you won't. It'd be no contest. Weak tea and tiger sweat."

"I ought to hit you," she said.

"Go ahead."

"If I wasn't holding the baby, I would." But she didn't look especially mad. She was a fine lot of woman and her eyes were suddenly soft. "You with your foot in everything you ever said to me," she told him now. "How could I have been nice to you in high school? Would you have let me?"

"Try me now," he said. "I'm stupid, but willin'."

"Get away from me."

She was holding Armand and couldn't defend herself. She was between the high chair and a kitchen cabinet. Fogarty, with a boldness he had never in his life displayed, kissed her.

"I always wondered what it would be like," he said. "Since I was a kid, I've wondered. And now I find it tastes like strained green beans."

Rose Amato came home from the hospital at eight o'clock. She was a pretty-faced, compact, and virtuous woman of high emotional pitch. She had settled down. She was grateful and worn. Her children were safe and asleep. She sat on the sofa.

"Angelo's going to be all right," she said again. "Saint Anthony did it."

"Saint Anthony or Saint Patrick," Fogarty said. "I was praying too . . . Rose, listen to me." Her dark eyes searched him. "Did Angelo do a repair job on a car last night?"

"Why do you ask me that?" She turned to Sarah, as though the other woman could assist her. "Why does he ask me?"

"I don't have to ask again," he said. "Was it Frank Savarese who came here, Rose? Or anyone of his crowd? You may think it's safer not to say anything, but you're wrong. Never mind the threats they made."

"Never mind the threats?" she said in wonder. "After this morning, never mind them?"

"Savarese can only be dangerous when he's out of jail," said Fogarty. "And I'll tell you this: I can't help you or Angelo if you were accomplices to what happened."

"Angelo didn't know," she said. "He didn't know what they had done."

"You mean he didn't know until this morning about Eddie Bernstein. But last night he knew they must have hurt something or someone, didn't he?"

"They forced him to help them," Rose said now. "He couldn't say 'No,' the way they kept after him. 'Get a new headlight,' they said. 'Go down to the shop,' they said. They kept him from the phone. They kept him from me. They talked all the time about the children, the baby even. It was Savarese, yes. Him and two others. A fellow named Phil went down to the shop with

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Angelo. You understand, Joe, how it had to be?"

"I understand he did exactly what they wanted," Fogarty said. "So that if Savarese had the brains of a goat and destroyed the evidence, there's not a thing anyone can do. Savarese took the broken headlight with him, didn't he?"

"He thought he did," Rose said.

"What do you mean, 'he thought'?"

"Angelo brought two headlights from the shop," Rose said. "Don't ask me how he managed to do it. I wasn't there to see. After he did the job for them, they made him check the fender and the bumper for any spots. He told me in bed that he worked slow. It was cold out there in the garage, so they came in the house here for a drink, the three men.

"That's when Angelo's chance came. He twisted the other light. He cut himself on purpose, under the elbow. Right here, like it was an accident. God is my judge, Joe. And in two minutes' time he has the second headlight looking like the first. That's the one he gave to Savarese, with his own blood on it."

"You've got the other one?" Fogarty said. "You've got it here?"

"Where Angelo told me to put it. He said to wrap it like a roast and put in a freezer—until he got in touch with you."

"You're my girl, Rose. Angelo's my boy."

"I'll get it now. It doesn't seem so scary when you're here, Joe."

She returned with a lightly frosted package which Fogarty hastily unwrapped. The chrome of the bright outer casing had been dented and twisted by impact; the glass that remained was jagged, like a funny-paper starburst. The chrome and glass were smeared, as though by some swift attempt to wipe it with a rag.

But under the strong light of a lamp, there were fragments visible —*of cloth*, thought Fogarty, *from Eddie Bernstein's coat? A*nd then, quite visible, too, and less pleasant to see, the gelatinous clots of a good man's blood.

"This'll do it," said Fogarty. "In a lab it's got to stand up."

That was when he heard Rose Amato scream and Sarah Kearney gasp. A shaft of cold air had cut into the warmth of the room. A door closed with finality, as though the men in the doorway had been standing there for more than a fractional moment.

"You got to stand up, too, Joey," someone said.

Fogarty was obliged to rise and turn from a crouched position, his eyes still blinking from the effort they had made in the lamp's strong glare. He saw Frank Savarese.

"Put that thing on the table, Joey."

Fogarty held to it dearly, as though to the world's last loaf of bread. Other items were in focus: the gun in Savarese's hand; a thief

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named Phil Mobile; and likely enough, thought Fogarty, there'd be another one outside. They'd handled it well. There'd been no sound or sweep of lights to betray their approach or their arrival.

"Put it down," Savarese repeated.

"Why do you want it?" Fogarty asked.

"Look, don't be comic. We started out tailin' Miss Mohawk V at nine o'clock this mornin'. She went to your office—you of all people; she wouldn't give you the dirt off a hub cap, so we knew then Angelo'd talked.

"When you take a cab out here an' wait four hours for Angelo's wife, we figure there must be business. That's an interesting piece of goods you got in your hands. It's something I've got to have. Put it down on the table, just like I told you."

"You're not talking to some stooge at the beach club, Savarese. I'm an ex-cop, remember?"

"Ex-cop is good. You could be an ex-lawyer too."

"I could get lucky," Fogarty said.

"You've been a chump all your life. It's too late now. All I want is that headlight. For the last time, Joey."

"For the last time, what?"

They heard the squeal of protesting rubber as a car turned into the narrow drive at Angelo Amato's house. The lights were brazen, blinding high. The man named Phil Mobile crouched at a window, trying to see. Frank Savarese backed nervously away.

Fogarty walked after him, the broken headlight in his hands. He hit Savarese in the face with it, then lunged for the heavy man. They fell and rolled together and the gun got away from Savarese.

Fogarty hit him once, twice, three times with heavy-handed sincerity. It was very effective. Fogarty then got to his feet, his hands still clenched, but the man named Phil Mobile was only standing there, suspended in doubt, gazing anxiously from Sarah Kearney to the light that still filled the driveway.

"You may need this," Sarah said to Fogarty. She gave him Savarese's gun.

"You won't need it for me," said Phil Mobile. "Let's get it straight. I wasn't in no car on Manion Road."

Phil, like Fogarty, watched the door with apprehension as it opened and the sky-high, puzzled figure of Charles Nestor Forbes came into the room. There was another man behind him, faithful to his assignment—up to a point.

"Keep walking. Keep coming in, you bum," said Fogarty to the stranger. "Drop the gun on the floor."

Charles Nestor Forbes looked about with interest, a man as edified as he was terrified, so that he was, in his way, a person to be admired.

"This isn't exactly in my line," Charles said, "but shouldn't someone phone the police?"

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"You, Charles," Fogarty suggested. "You'd be just the man. Give my politest respects to the sergeant at the desk. Call Sound City four-three-thousand."

Fogarty couldn't have explained why he went back to his office at such an hour, except that it was a good place to think and a better place to brood. He wondered why he had let Charles Nestor Forbes take Sarah home. *Because I don't own a car of my own,* he thought, *and had to ride back with the cops.*

He sat there a while until he heard footsteps outside his door. Things being as they had been through the day, he got up hastily. Sarah Kearney was standing there.

"Where did you come from?"

"I came from Feeney's diner," she explained. "I saw your light on, and that nice irresponsible janitor—he let me in downstairs. I brought you coffee and a dry jelly doughnut. I also wore my 'Vote for Fogarty' pin."

"Why?"

"Because I think you're going to be mayor some day. I've got great hopes for you, Joe."

"Come here," he said.

She didn't taste of strained green beans when Fogarty, a willing man, began fulfilling her hopes.

"I told Charles not to wait," she said softly, "but I think it's time you let go."

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If we remember correctly, it was Ellery Queen who first wrote a series of sports detective short stories—murder and theft against the backgrounds of prizefighting, baseball, football, and horse racing. Since then other sports detective stories have appeared, but surely the theme has not been overworked. So when Julian Symons began a sports series (we have already brought you his story about tennis at Wimbledon), it seemed like a fresh approach all over again.

Now, here is a Julian Symons story about murder in a Sports Arena, during a fight for the bantamweight championship of the world—a murder planned to the smallest detail, so perfectly synchronized with the action in the ring that nothing could possibly go wrong. It is a story of tension, apprehension, and suspension—and of dimension too . . .

EIGHT MINUTES TO KILL

by JULIAN SYMONS

THE LIGHTS WENT UP ALL OVER Harringay Arena. People yawned, stretched, moved out of their seats, went along to the bars and had drinks. Girls in blue coats moved down the gangways, hopefully trying to sell programs, or books about Jack Dempsey and Rocky Marciano.

Billy Baxter, the promoter, removed the cigar from his mouth long enough to ask half a dozen people to come along and have a quick one with him in his private bar. People were suddenly relaxed and genial; yet mixed with the relaxation was a certain expectancy. The last of the preliminaries was over. The big fight was to come.

As the lights went up, a man in his late thirties, a pleasant-looking man, with nothing unusual about him except his curling reddish hair and his prawn-whisker eyebrows, slipped out of the end seat he occupied in Section N, conveniently near the Number 6 exit, and walked with a light but hurried step toward a telephone box. The man had been christened Max Hoven. Not so

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many years ago he had been an S.S. officer, in an administrative post at Auschwitz. Now he called himself Art Lancing.

He had come to Harringay that night to kill a man, and he had eight minutes in which to do it. He was now about to make the first move in an intricate but logical and, as he believed, foolproof plan.

A man was in the telephone booth. He stepped out when Lancing tapped lightly on the window. The red-haired man handed him a ten-shilling note, nodded, and went into the booth. The man was an attendant, who knew nothing more than that Lancing had asked him to keep the booth free when the last of the preliminaries was over, so that he could make an urgent telephone call.

Lancing dialed a Gerrard number. It rang once and then a voice said, "Yes."

Lancing said, "Now, Buster."

The man said, "Right away. Soon as you put the phone down."

"You know what you have to do?" Lancing's English was perfect, although a little mechanical. He spoke with a slight American accent.

"Like a book. Ten minutes I'm to keep him talking. Easy. But listen, I don't know what it's all about."

"It is not necessary that you should know," Lancing said, and hung up.

Buster Marks, a small-time crook, had been paid £25 to make a telephone call. It made no sense to him, but it was a job and Lancing knew that he would do it.

He stopped to light a cigarette and walked slowly back to the Arena, showing his ticket to the attendants at the entrance. He stood for a moment watching the crowd of faces going up tier on tier, to the roof as it seemed. Then his light, impersonal gaze moved to a man in the front row by the ringside, a short, plump, baldish man smoking a fat cigar.

This was Jimmy Dain, the man to be killed.

A man sat on either side of Jimmy Dain. These men also were smoking fat cigars. They were his bodyguards.

Suddenly the lights went out, a fanfare played, and two spotlights in the roof played on a man who came out of an entrance to the right of where Art Lancing was standing. The spotlights followed this man as he walked up the gangway and ducked under the ropes into the ring.

The man held up his hands as the crowd roared its applause, clasped them together, and turned round, revealing the name on his dressing gown: Rangeri. This was Paul Rangeri, the thickset French Canadian who was bantamweight champion of the world.

Another fanfare, and the spotlights swung away to another boxer who performed the same ritual of

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walking up the gangway, ducking under the ropes, and clasping his hands. The cheers were thunderous, especially from the Irishmen in the audience. This was Billy Murphy from Eire, who was taking on what most people felt to be a forlorn hope in meeting the lightning-quick Rangeri. But young Murphy looked fit enough, and confident enough, as he raised his hands to the audience.

This evening Art Lancing was not interested in the boxing. He noticed that a leather-faced, bulky, smiling man had come up the steps and was standing beside him. This was Billy Baxter himself.

How would it be, Art Lancing—who prided himself on his sardonic sense of humor—wondered, how would it be if he were to tap the promoter on the shoulder and say to him, "You don't know me, but I've come here to kill a man. I do apologize in advance for causing a disturbance, but on this occasion it was unavoidable."

Baxter would think he was crazy, but he would be making a mistake. Bubbling with suppressed mirth, Art Lancing moved to his seat.

Now the announcer was in the ring, bellowing that this was a ten-round championship fight between Paul Rangeri, bantamweight champion of the world and . . .

Jimmy Dain was watching the boxers and rolling the cigar between his blubbery lips. "He's a lovely fighter, that Rangeri. This'll be a massacre, Mike."

The man on his right was a bony, hard-eyed Irishman named O'Hara. He said, "I still like the Irish boy. He's fast and he can punch. If he can last the first couple of rounds I think he can win."

"You want to express that feeling in cash, Mike?" Jimmy Dain was jovial. "One hundred dollars can win you three hundred."

O'Hara shook his head. "I never bet except on certainties."

"How about you, Joe?" Jimmy Dain turned to the man on his left.

Joe Moxon was a hulking, beetle-browed Nordic blond, who seemed to be bursting out of his suit. "What you say?"

"You like to make a little bet on Murphy?"

"I don't feel like betting, Mr. Dain. I'm worried about Chrissie."

"Ah, go on. Women have had babies before. It's human nature, so they tell me."

"But you don't understand, Mr. Dain. Chrissie's got this special sort of blood—you know what they call it, rhesus something or other—and this is her second baby. The doctor told me the danger is always with the second baby—"

"Can it, Joe. This is a fight, not a mother's meeting." Jimmy Dain's voice was sour.

Joe Moxon's underlip quivered. He did not like to be spoken to harshly.

Mike O'Hara said, "Cheer

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up, Joe. Day after tomorrow you'll be back in New York and seeing Chrissie in person."

One of the blue-coated attendants was coming down the gangway. Lancing pushed his program under the seat and asked for another. As the girl gave it to him he said, "You know what to do."

"Oh, it's you." She gave a little gasp. "Yes."

"And when to do it."

"Yes, after the announcement over the loudspeaker." She said a little fearfully, "It's only a joke, isn't it? I won't get into trouble?"

Art Lancing looked up at her from under the prawn-whisker eyebrows and smiled. "Why should you get into trouble? You're only passing on a message."

"That's right. I'm not doing anything wrong, am I?" She brightened. "I'll do it. It'd be a shame to spoil your joke."

Especially when you're getting £5 for it, you little fool, thought Art Lancing, as he smiled again at the girl. As he listened to the announcer giving details of the fight, he moved a little uneasily in his seat. It was time for Buster Marks to make that telephone call.

During these moments—while the boxers were being greeted by a fanfare, entering the ring, shaking hands, listening to the referee—Buster Marks was speaking to the telephone girl at the Arena switchboard.

"I have an urgent call from New York for Mr. Joseph Moxon." Buster had been a small-part actor before he became a small-time crook, and he mimicked well enough the clipped impersonality of a telephone operator. "I have been in touch with his hotel and they inform me that he is in the Arena. Could you get a message through and ask him to come to the telephone, please? The name is Moxon —M-O-X-O-N."

"Just a moment." The switchboard girl wrote down the name and called an attendant. "Can you ask the announcer to make an announcement, and bring this gentleman here. It's urgent—a call from New York." To Buster Marks she said, "Hold on, please. I am trying to contact him for you."

Buster was telephoning from a girl friend's flat and the girl was stroking his hair. He winked at her and took a piece of Turkish delight from a box by his side.

It took the attendant thirty seconds to get down to the Arena. Another fifteen seconds, and the message had been handed to the announcer. Another fifteen, and the words boomed round the Arena over the loudspeaker system.

"Will Mr. Moxon, Mr. Joseph Moxon, please go to the main telephone switchboard, where an urgent call awaits him from New York. I will repeat—"

Joe Moxon was on his feet. "New York. That means Chrissie."

Jimmy Dain waved him away.

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"Good luck, boy. Love and kisses to that sweet little girl of yours."

From his seat at the end of the row Art Lancing watched Joe Moxon hurry out of the hall. It worked, he thought. And it worked because it was the logical answer. He had said as much to Charlie Black ten days earlier, when Charlie had come to the New York gym that had ART LANCING written up outside it. Here Lancing was doing some work with the punchball. He never let himself get stale.

Charlie Black watched him in silence for a minute, then said, "Mr. Fixer's going to talk."

Lancing raised his eyebrows but said nothing. It was one of his little vanities never to appear surprised or shocked. But he realized the importance of the news.

Charlie Black was probably the most important racketeer left in New York, and he was being investigated by a Senate Committee. As racketeers go, Charlie Black was respectable. He had always preferred bribery to violence, corruption to murder, and Jimmy Dain, known as Mr. Fixer, was—or had been—his right-hand man.

If Mr. Fixer talked about the various jobs and people he had fixed in the past few years he could say more than enough to put Charlie Black and some other people into prison.

Lancing began to towel himself. Charlie Black watched him. "You don't say much."

"What do you want me to say? Jimmy Dain's in Europe."

"That's right. Traveling round with a couple of bodyguards. Not our boys; he picked them up himself. I should have suspected when he did that. He's saving his own skin, getting out from under. Odds are he won't come back till it's time for him to testify."

Now Lancing was toweling his legs. He did not look up. "Why tell me?"

"I want you to do a job on him. Do it over there. It's not easy, but you're intelligent, or so you say. You won't mind a little difficulty."

This, as Lancing knew, was an appeal to his vanity. But although he knew that, the appeal was still there. And in a sense the appeal was strengthened by the fact that Charlie Black had no need to make it. Black had provided the forged papers that turned the Nazi war criminal Max Hoven, who was wanted for his activities at Auschwitz, into physical training instructor Art Lancing.

It was Charlie Black who had put up the money for the gymnasium that served as a cover for other activities, some of them legal, others very much the reverse. He had treated Art Lancing well, never identifying him with the small army of thugs who were on his payroll and were sometimes—although reluctantly—used. In

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three years Charlie Black had asked Lancing to do only half a dozen jobs, and they had always been well paid. Yet the fact remained that he could turn Art Lancing back into Max Hoven any day he wanted to.

Remembering these things, Art Lancing smiled and said, "I don't mind a little difficulty."

Then Charlie Black told him some of the details. The job had to be done in England, because as soon as Dain came back the cops would keep him close as a fly in amber until he had testified. But it wouldn't be easy. Dain never left his hotel or went anywhere without the two bodyguards. They even slept in his suite. Lancing would have to get rid of them somehow.

"It won't be easy," Charlie Black said again, as he named the amount Lancing was to get for the job.

Lancing did not comment on the amount, which was double what he had expected. But he did say, "To do a job and get away, that is never easy. But it is always possible. It is simply a problem in logic."

Next day he was on an airplane to England . . .

The attendant took Joe Moxon along a passage and into the switchboard room, where a smiling girl pointed to a telephone. He sntached at it.

"Hello," Buster said. "I have a call for Mr. Joe Moxon, at Harringay Arena—"

Joe Moxon's great hand gripped the telephone receiver, hard. "This is Joe Moxon. Is that my wife you've got on the line?"

"That is Mr. Joe Moxon speaking?"

"That's right, yes, Joe Moxon here."

"Just a moment, Mr. Moxon. I will try to connect you with New York."

Buster jiggled the receiver a little experimentally. The girl beside him rocked with silent laughter. "Hello there. Hello, New York. Are you answering? Please answer me, New York." To Joe he said, "New York seems to have gone off for the moment, Mr. Moxon. I'll try to get them again. Hold on, please."

"All right, all right." To the girl in the office Joe Moxon said, "How do you like that now? There's my wife ringing me from New York. She's having this baby, see, and she's a rhesus or whatever they call it—"

"A rhesus negative?"

"That's it. Do you know what they have to do with those poor little babies sometimes? Have to pump all the blood out of them and put fresh blood in. Makes you think, eh?" His brow was corrugated with the effort of thought. "Hello, hello," he shouted.

Buster had put one hand over the receiver, while with the other he

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stroked his girl friend's leg. Now he took a large handkerchief from his pocket and put it over the mouthpiece. "Hello there, hello," he intoned in a falsetto version of what he imagined to be an American accent.

The words came through faintly to Moxon. "Hello, is that the hospital? Is it about my wife?"

"Would that be Mr. Panchizzi? Are you there, Mr. Panchizzi? You've got a fine little baby boy."

Sweat came out on Moxon's forehead. "For God's sake, my name's not Panchizzi, it's Moxon."

"Eight and a half pounds."

"My name's *Moxon* and you're calling me in *London*."

The girl at Buster's side could hardly control her laughter. He put a finger to his lips. Getting frantic, he thought; mustn't play the fish too hard. He removed the handkerchief and said in his previous voice, "Sorry, Mr. Moxon, we seem to have hit on a crossed line. Hold on and I'll try to get it put right."

Moxon swore.

Act One over, Art Lancing thought. And it was easy. He watched the blue-coated program seller go up the gangway toward the front row. Now comes Act Two, he said to himself. And this may not be so easy.

It had not been easy, not easy at all, to discover a way of getting at Mr. Fixer. Dain knew him only slightly, but Lancing put on a red wig to cover his tow-colored hair, and added the prawn-whisker eyebrows as a concession to the need for concealment. It took him less than a day to discover bribable attendants at the Gloria Hotel, where the three men were staying.

He discovered that Dain went out only irregularly, and then always accompanied by the bodyguards. He ate all meals in his room. He never opened the door in person.

Lancing considered trying to force a way in and leaving a homemade bomb outside the bedroom (but, although he had some criminal contacts in London, he knew nobody who could make such a thing), and half a dozen other ideas involving an attack in the hotel. He rejected them all as too uncertain in effect, or too risky for himself.

Then one of the hotel clerks told him that Mr. Dain and his friends had booked three ringside seats for the big fight between Rangeri and Murphy, and the pieces of the puzzle began to drop into place.

Mr. Fixer loved a big fight. He liked to watch, and he liked to bet. On the night of the fight his alertness would be relaxed a little. But still the bodyguards would be on either side of him. How did it help? Lancing put his mind to it . . .

Now a hush was over the whole Arena. The boxers sat placid in

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their corners, while the seconds were adjusting their gloves. The program girl had reached the place where Jimmy Dain and Mike O'Hara were sitting.

There was a period of between four and five minutes between the last of the preliminaries and the start of the big fight. Then the general lights went out during the first three minutes of the first round, but came on again for each one-minute between rounds.

Would it be possible to shoot Mr. Fixer during one of those one minutes, either close to or from a distance? Lancing rejected this idea because he would have so little chance of getting away.

All his investigations led to one conclusion. Somehow the two bodyguards must be removed. Then, under cover of darkness, during the first round, Dain must be killed with a knife. But bodyguards must be got away only just before the fight began, or suspicion would be aroused.

Supposing he started operations when the preliminaries were finished—that would give him the four or five minute gap, plus the three minutes of the first round. Call it eight minutes.

Eight minutes to kill.

But we must be logical, Lancing said to himself. We must cover every possibility. What about a first-round knockout? He decided that the confusion caused by such a sensation would offer him an ideal opportunity. If he could keep to the time schedule the thing could be done.

But how were the two bodyguards to be removed? The big stupid one, Moxon, was always talking about his wife and the baby they were going to have. Something could be done with that. O'Hara was a tougher case, but there must be some way of getting at him . . .

The program girl leaned over and whispered, "Excuse me, it is Mr. O'Hara, isn't it?"

O'Hara's eyes were hard and suspicious. "That's me."

"There's a gentleman from the police to see you, sir. Just outside in the passage."

"From the police. They don't want me. It's a trick."

"Oh, no, sir." The girl's eyes were frightened. Perhaps she should not have done it, she thought, but now that she'd started she had to go on. "Something about a car, sir, a car you'd hired. He said it wouldn't take a minute."

"It's true we use a hired car." O'Hara hesitated. "What do you think, boss?"

Jimmy Dain waved a fat hand. He was concentrating on the boxers. "You heard her say it was only for a minute. You'd better go, Mike."

"I don't like it. Joe's not here, either. Where's he got to?"

"Talking to his wife. This is England, Mike. Nobody's going to hurt me while I'm sitting here."

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"I don't like it." O'Hara gripped the girl's arm so hard that she winced. "How do we know she isn't a fake, dressed up in these clothes?"

"There's a man who ought to be able to tell us." Jimmy Dain got to his feet clumsily. "Mr. Baxter, can you spare time to answer a question?"

Billy Baxter was walking past them, on the way to his seat. "I can't, but I will. As long as it's only one."

"My name's Jimmy Dain, and I'm over from the States. I'd like to say—"

Baxter held up a hand. "I hate to say this, but I can answer a question, not hear a speech. If you've got one, let's have it."

"Here it is. Is this young lady one of your official program sellers, or is she not?"

The promoter stared at him. "Well, now, Mr. Dain, I should call this a sort of case of mistaken identity. I'm running a show here, not making up a roster of the program girls."

"But Mr. Baxter, you do remember me." The girl was now almost in tears. "My name's Lily Jacobs and I was serving at your private bar the last time you were here."

Billy Baxter stared hard at her, then patted her cheek. "So you were. And very pretty you looked behind the bar, too. That make you happy, Mr. Dain?"

"Just clears up a little point. Have a cigar?" He produced a bulky metal cigar case from an inside pocket.

"Just threw one away a minute ago. You wouldn't believe it, but just before a big fight like this I get nervous as a kitten. Thanks all the same."

He walked away. Jimmy Dain lowered his bulk back into the seat. "You made me look silly, Mike. Satisfied?"

"I suppose so. I wish Joe would come back."

"Be your age, Mike. Nothing's going to happen."

"If there's any other message, if they want to get you out of here, stay put. Even if it's supposed to come from me."

Jimmy Dain rolled the cigar round in his mouth. "Boy, wild horses wouldn't drag me away from this ringside just now."

O'Hara turned to the girl, "Come on then, let's go."

In the switchboard room Joe Moxon was saying pleadingly into the telephone, "Will you please, *please* get me reconnected to that hospital." There was no reply. "Hello there," he shouted.

Buster Marks had been holding the receiver too close to his ear. He was almost deafened. "Please do not shout, Mr. Moxon, I am doing my best to reconnect you," he said reprovingly.

His girl friend, a little bored with the joke, was looking at herself in

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a glass. Buster took another piece of Turkish delight.

When the girl walked up to give the message to O'Hara, Lancing got out of his seat and joined the crowd of boxers, managers, and hangers-on standing around the entrance. From there he saw O'Hara's reluctance to leave the Arena, saw Dain's approach to the promoter, and pressed his nails into his palm.

Was it possible that O'Hara would ignore the police summons? Trained in the German tradition of respect for authority, and aware of the terror that a police call had meant in Nazi Germany, he had never seriously considered that as a possibility. For seconds that seemed like minutes, he watched the four figures standing there, saw Baxter leave them, Dain sit down, and then—yes, O'Hara was coming.

Lancing walked quickly into the passage outside the Arena. As he stood waiting, his fingers curled and uncurled themselves round the small blackjack in his jacket pocket.

The girl brought O'Hara up to him. Lancing could see her looking at him, afraid now that she might have done something wrong. She wouldn't forget his face—but what did it matter? Remove the red wig and the prawn-whisker eyebrows, and she would never be able to make a positive identification.

Besides, by the time that any investigation was made, Art Lancing would be back in New York and could go under cover for a month or two if necessary. There was no way in which the British authorities could trace Jimmy Dain's death directly to an American source, and if the investigation did move to New York, probably Charlie Black could pull some strings.

"Mr. O'Hara? I'm Inspector Greenside of the C.I.D. Could I have a word with you privately?" The girl was standing there. What did she want? She had got her money. "You can go," he said to her. She went, but unwillingly. For a moment a danger signal flashed in Lancing's mind. Then he forgot it.

"A plainclothes cop," O'Hara said. "Where's your proof of identity?"

Lancing smiled. "I don't blame you for being suspicious. You've got some reason to be." He opened his wallet and showed the card that had been forged for him. It wasn't a particularly good forgery, but it was good enough to satisfy an Irish-American who knew nothing about the English police force.

O'Hara nodded. He was still watchful, but no longer suspicious. "What's the trouble? Something about a car, the girl said."

"Yes." They began to walk toward the exit. "You hired a car a few days ago from the Uneeda Car Hire Company."

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"How do you know that?"

"I rang them up, gave them the car number, and they said it had been hired to you. Rang your hotel and they told me your party was here."

"I don't mean that. How did you connect my car with the Uneeda Company in the first place?"

"Their label was in it. This way." He led the way round to the left. O'Hara stopped abruptly.

"My car's in the parking lot, over there."

Lancing laughed again. "Not any more. We have put it round here, out of harm's way."

Outside, the Arena was deserted and would remain so until the fight was over. A solitary doorman watched incuriously as they walked under a covered way and turned round by some administrative buildings.

"What do you mean, out of harm's way?"

At the other side of the administrative buildings there was a quiet, dark recess that would do very well. Another 50 yards and they were there.

"Mr. O'Hara," Lancing asked, "has anybody in your party got any enemies? Real enemies, I mean, who want to kill you?"

O'Hara's head jerked as though he had taken a punch. "Why?"

"Somebody put a time bomb in your car tonight."

O'Hara sucked in his breath. He was now completely convinced. Beautiful, Lancing thought, beautiful to see how a man always reacts to the right stimulus.

"Did you catch the man who put it there?" O'Hara demanded.

"He got away. The attendant saw a man bending down over the trunk of your car, and he seemed to be trying to force it. When the attendant came up, the man seemed to lose his nerve and ran. The attendant had a look in the car, saw a box there, heard it ticking, and got in touch with us."

Now they were there, right at the back of the buildings. There was nobody in sight. The recess was to the left. Lancing slipped the blackjack out of his pocket. "Just over there."

O'Hara turned his head to look, then cried, "There's no roadway. You couldn't put a car over there. You—"

Lancing struck. The blow was not a good one. Perhaps O'Hara's last-moment suspicion made him move a fraction, perhaps Lancing was more excited than he knew. The blackjack struck a glancing blow on the neck and shoulder, instead of on the head.

The blow brought O'Hara to his knees, but did not knock him out. He butted forward, hit Lancing in the stomach, and threw him back right into the recess. In another moment O'Hara was on him, his hot breath in Lancing's nostrils, his knee pinning down one arm, his

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strong fingers round Lancing's throat.

Lancing tried to pull the fingers away with his other hand, but failed. The man seemed to have hands made of steel. Lancing had a desperate consciousness of failure, bitter because it was so utterly unexpected.

There was one chance. He twisted round so that with his free hand he could get at the knife in his hip pocket. Then, with his head roaring as though a railway train were running through it, he struck upward. He struck three times.

O'Hara did not cry out. He gave a kind of grunt, that was all. The fingers round Lancing's neck slowly relaxed. Lancing pushed the warm, inert body aside scrambled up. He felt dismay, yet mixed with it was a wild, strange exhilaration.

He had not meant to kill O'Hara, merely to knock him out. But now he was dead, and Art Lancing felt something of the joy that Max Hoven had known in the prison camps. The knife had been for Jimmy Dain, but now—

Lancing dropped to his knees again and pulled out the knife. Deliberately he wiped it on the dead man's jacket, then replaced it in his hip pocket. A little unsteadily, like a man slightly drunk, he walked back toward the Arena.

He looked at his watch and saw with astonishment that only two minutes had elapsed since he had begun to talk to O'Hara. Even so, he had lost time; the fight must be almost about to start. He broke into a kind of shuffling run.

When he reached the Arena again, he stopped suddenly, seeing himself in a glass in the passage. His collar was undone, his tie askew. He put them straight with hands that still trembled a little, adjusted the red wig, and was about to move away when he saw the blood.

There were spots of red on his shirt, a dark stain on his jacket. He would have to change them before going to the airport, but fortunately he had a complete change of clothing in the suitcase which was in the car he had parked around the corner.

In any case, he could not give up now. There was no question of giving up.

At just the moment when Lancing took the blackjack from his pocket, Lily Jacobs finally made up her mind.

She knew what she ought to do, although she was frightened of doing it. She walked up the gangway again, went to Billy Baxter's seat, and said, "Mr. Baxter, I'm ever so sorry to be a bother, but I must speak to you."

The fight promoter looked up in astonishment.

"Stone the crows, it's you. Now, girlie, run away, will you."

"But, Mr. Baxter, I think he's a crook. That man who asked me to

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give the message, I mean. He gave me £5 and told me it was just a joke, but then he said he was a police inspector—"

Baxter got up reluctantly.

"The things I do for boxing," he said. "Come on, then, girlie. Let's hear what you've got to say. Quick."

Lily Jacobs told her story. When she had finished the promoter shrugged.

"What's it add up to, girlie? You take money from this man—which is what you're strictly not supposed to do—and he's working some sort of fiddle. He's not back in his seat, eh?" She shook her head. "But he's got a ticket, he's free to go in and out. Don't see I can do much about it. Same time, we don't want any trouble, and that's a fact."

He called one of the attendants on duty to check tickets. "You stay with him, girlie, tell him when you see this joker come in. And you *too,*" he prodded the attendant in the stomach "if you see him up to any funny business, come over and tell me, pronto. Got it?"

They nodded.

"Now perhaps I can get a bit of peace to watch this fight I'm supposed to be promoting."

In the ring the boxers' gloves had been fitted and inspected by the referee and the seconds. The fighters sat in their corners, patient and calm, looking much less nervous than the seconds who were talking to them urgently. The timekeeper was looking at his watch.

In the switchboard room Joe Moxon had passed beyond frenzy into speechlessness. He merely listened as Buster Marks said, "I am sorry. I am still trying to make the connection."

"Shall I see if I can help?" the switchboard girl asked sympathetically. She took the receiver. "Hello."

Buster, at the other end, was so startled that he almost dropped the telephone. In his normal East End Cockney accents he said, "Where's Moxon, Mr. Moxon that is? Where's he gone?"

The girl said incredulously, "What's that?"

Buster recovered his telephone operator manner. "Will you ask Mr. Moxon to come to the telephone? I think I have his call coming through now."

The switchboard girl put her hand over the receiver and whispered to Moxon, "I think this is some sort of trick, I don't believe it's a telephone operator at all on the other end. Keep him talking, and I'll get the number checked."

Moxon looked at the receiver with hatred, as if it were a man, but he held it in his great hand and said something, while the impersonal voice soothed him from the other end. Then the girl came over again. "It's a trick. Somebody calling from another London ex-

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change. The police say keep him talking."

Moxon stared at her unbelievingly. Then he gave a great roar of anger and pain, flung the telephone down, and ran out of the room.

Buster Marks heard the roar. "Hello, hello," he said cautiously. There was silence. He took another piece of Turkish delight, looked at the girl, and gently replaced the telephone receiver.

"Sweetie pie, I think we'd better get out of here quick," he said.

Jimmy Dain, in his ringside seat, might have been wondering where Joe Moxon and Mike O'Hara had got to, but in fact he had forgotten them completely. Watching an important fight was for Jimmy the perfect form of earthly enjoyment. He was conscious of nothing but the two men in the ring who were so soon to exchange blows, of the peculiar, charged emotional atmosphere compounded of resin and sweat, the heat of the lamps and the excitement of the audience.

If Jimmy Dain had known that his life was in danger, as it was, he would have been physically unable to move from his ringside seat.

Lancing paused in the corridor. He was uneasily conscious of the spots of blood on his shirt, the stain on his jacket. Should he go back to the car which he had parked in a nearby road—he had rejected the Arena's parking lot as too dangerous—and change his clothes quickly, now?

But of course that was a perfectly ridiculous idea. His timetable did not begin to allow for it. He must have been more upset than he had realized by the trouble with O'Hara. Illogically upset, which annoyed him. Logically there was no reason to be upset. In spite of the awkwardness about O'Hara, everything had gone to plan.

He took a deep breath and moved forward out of the passage into the noise, heat, and smoke of the Arena. An attendant said, "Your ticket, please, sir."

Lancing hesitated. It had come into his mind suddenly that there was blood on his hands, and that the attendant would see it when he produced his ticket. Then he put his hand in his waistcoat pocket, pulled out the ticket. The attendant glanced at it, nodded.

Lancing could not prevent himself from looking down. There was no blood on his hand. Then he saw the blue-coated attendant to whom he had given £5 for passing on the message to O'Hara. She was staring at him. Perhaps he had given her too much money—it was not easy to translate a dollar bribe into pounds. Again he had that prickly feeling of danger.

He put it away from him, went to his seat in Section N. It would take him no more than a few seconds to reach the spot where Jimmy Dain sat, a vacant place on

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either side of him. Lancing took out of his pocket, and pulled onto his hands, a pair of thin cotton gloves.

Lily Jacobs said to the attendant who had checked the ticket, "Did you see?"

"See what?"

"There were red spots on his shirt. Blood."

"You're excited." The attendant was sympathetic but skeptical. "Letting things get to you. Don't want to do that."

"I tell you he had blood on his shirt! And where's the man who went out with him?"

"Couldn't say. I only know what Mr. Baxter told me—let him know if this geezer does anything queer. Couldn't say he's doing anything at the minute, just sitting in his seat. Excuse *me*, sir. May I see your ticket?"

Joe Moxon had just come up to him, head lowered like a bull.

The timekeeper tapped his bell. The two boxers, like puppets moved by the sound, rose. The stools behind them were whisked away. On their toes like ballet dancers, they moved into the center of the ring. The great Arena was perfectly quiet.

Bantamweight Billy Murphy, the slim "unknown" from Eire, hitched his red-and-gold trunks and stepped smartly toward the dark, square-shouldered figure of Paul Rangeri, champion of the world from Canada. Their scarlet gloves touched in salute. The fight was on.

Rangeri, peeping from behind close-cupped gloves in the generally accepted fashion, tried a left to the ribs. Murphy danced away. Rangeri carried the fight to a neutral corner, bore his man to the ropes, and shot another left. Murphy tossed an exploring right—and missed.

All very orthodox—with no possible hint that, eight rounds later, the champion of the world was to suffer his first defeat at the hands of this underdog, Murphy.

The people around Lancing sat with their eyes glued to the ring. He felt for them the kind of contempt that a man with work to do has for those who are merely enjoying themselves. He got up from his seat, a dark shadow in a dark scene, and began to move toward the ringside and Jimmy Dain.

Joe Moxon, caught by the excitement of those opening exchanges, was still standing beside the ticket-checking attendant and Lily Jacobs. Only Lily saw the dark shadow move. She gripped the attendant's arm. "Look."

"What do you mean?"

"He's out of his seat—going down towards the front."

"So he is." Reluctantly the attendant said, "Reckon I'd better tell Mr. Baxter."

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It was all beautifully simple, Lancing thought. Pass by Dain in the rich, concealing darkness. Lean over, unrecognizable, and then—one stab, one accurate stroke.

Then briskly walk away, out of the Arena, out to the waiting car. The lights would not go up until the end of the round. It would be five minutes at least before pursuit was organized.

Before that time he would be well away. By tomorrow midday he would be back in New York.

His gloved hand closed on the thin knife.

"Hell," Joe Moxon said. He began to run down the gangway. The attendant, moved by his urgency, walked down the aisle, toward Billy Baxter.

"Oh, very good," Jimmy Dain said with a chuckle. His gaze was fixed on the ring. "Good boy, good boy." He never saw his attacker, was utterly unprepared.

Lancing moved unnoticed along the front row, paused a fraction of a moment when he reached Dain, leaned over, and in one smooth movement drove the knife with his right hand into Dain's body.

Jimmy Dain gurgled slightly in his throat, and slumped back in his seat.

Lancing had been conscious of some resistance to his blow, but he felt the knife go in, and he could not wait to see the result. Nor did he withdraw the knife. He turned and walked back briskly the way he had come, confident that he had killed Jimmy Dain and that he had done it unobserved.

His second supposition was correct. The people behind and to the side of Jimmy Dain, absorbed in the fight, had not seen the blow struck. But Lancing had not killed Jimmy Dain. The blow glanced off his silver cigar case and missed the heart, leaving a wound that was painful, but not, as it proved later, fatal.

Joe Moxon did not see the blow struck, but he did see the shadow move along the front row, bend over, walk back. As Lancing walked briskly back toward the exit, Moxon barred his way.

"What were you doing down there?" Moxon asked. His voice was a growl, deep in his throat. "Doing to Jimmy?" He was still just a little hesitant, not quite sure of what he had seen.

That hesitancy was his undoing. Lancing drove his gloved right fist hard into Moxon's solar plexus. The big man doubled up with pain.

Lancing was past him, pushing past the men round the gangway, out into the passage. In his mind, though, there was the sickening realization that something had gone wrong. He no longer believed in the impeccable logic of the enterprise. Buster had failed him, the stupid little program girl had failed him—or was it that he himself had

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failed? He was, anyway, hardly surprised, when he had reached the emergency exit door, to hear a shout behind him.

He turned for a moment and saw his enemies—the program girl, Baxter himself, a couple of quite obvious policemen. The game was up, but he refused to believe that it was lost. He slammed the door behind him and ran out into the night air.

He had only a few yards' start, but he had the advantage that his pursuers would not know where his car was parked—would not know, even, that he had a car. He ran round to the left, skirted the spot where he had killed O'Hara, doubled back into the main road. Here he forced himself to a normal walk.

The narrow road in which he had put the car was the first turning to the left. He risked a quick look behind and saw that he had lost them for the moment. It could not be for long, but it might be long enough. He turned into the road.

It was not well lighted and at first he did not see the car. He must have left it farther down the road than he had thought. He ran down some 50 yards, then stopped. He could see the road from one end to the other.

There was no car in it.

He felt the utter bewilderment of a man whose whole world has turned upside down. He must be in the wrong road—but he knew he was not. Or perhaps he had not brought a car here at all—but he knew he had. He was walking up and down in an aimless way when the policeman saw him.

"Looking for something, sir?"

It would be a crowning absurdity if the police helped him to find the car. "Yes. It is ridiculous, but I have lost my car."

The policeman nodded. He did not seem surprised. He pointed to a *No Parking* sign on the other side of the road. "Do you see that notice?"

Had he seen it? Lancing could not remember, but if so he had paid it no attention. What did a summons matter to him? "I don't know. Do you mean you know where my car is?"

The policeman said heavily, "Your car, sir, has been towed away by the police, because it was causing an obstruction. This road is used considerably when an important event is taking place at the Arena and 'as to be kept clear." He took a breath. "Powers to remove cars are vested in the Metropolitan Police under the Traffic Act, but 'ave previously only been used in Central London. Tonight they have been extended to Harringay. If you wish to reclaim your car, sir, you may do so by going—"

But Lancing was laughing. Great tears of laughter rolled down his cheeks. "You have taken away my car for a traffic offense. It is really

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very funny. Do you know, I think that for the first time I can appreciate English humor."

At the end of the road a little knot of people appeared. He recognized Moxon and then the program girl.

"There he is," she cried. "Don't let him get away."

"I am a logical man," Lancing said to the bewildered policeman. "But logic must be defeated by your humor."

He took from his waistcoat pocket the tiny box he had kept for years awaiting such an occasion, opened it, and quickly put the pill in his mouth.

This ultimate logic, at least, did not fail him.

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York, Jeremy	TO KILL OR DIE	Macmillan Company	3.95	11/1

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Introducing a new kind of detective—Richard Verner who calls himself a "heuristician." Yes, we had to consult a dictionary too; we never even heard of the word, and certainly as detective-story writers we should have been familiar with it. Life is always exciting when you learn something new every day . . .

THE PROBLEM SOLVER AND THE SPY

by CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

RICHARD VERNER LEANED BACK IN his office chair with the alert look of a big cat as, across the desk, Nathan Bancroft, a quietly dressed man of average height, spoke earnestly.

"Last Saturday, Mr. Verner, a technician at one of our most highly classified research laboratories got away with the plans for a new and secret type of laser device. The scientist who invented the device evidently tried to stop him, and was stabbed to death."

Verner nodded intently.

Bancroft went on. "To understand the situation that's come about, you have to know that the region around this laboratory has a great many caverns. These are connected in a gigantic system of natural tunnels, rooms, crevices, and underground streams that have never been thoroughly mapped or explored.

"The technologist who stole the plans is an ardent speleologist—cave explorer. Possibly one reason for his hobby is that he suffers from hay fever, and cavern air is pure. In any case, over a period of years he's spent entire days in an underground complex of branching tunnels known as the Maze of Minos. A number of cave explorers have been lost in there, and the local people shun it. The only known expert on this underground maze is the murderer himself.

"Now, there's no question, Mr. Verner, but that this spy expected to be far away before the theft of the plans was discovered. But, by sheer good luck, the director of the laboratory discovered what had happened, and immediately notified the police. The police were lucky too—they spotted the technician's car just after the call came in. But then we all ran out of luck. The technician, taking the plans with him, escaped into this cavern—this Maze of Minos."

"And got away?" said Verner.

"Got clean away," said Bancroft. "The tunnels branch off in all directions, and of course it's as dark in

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there as the blackest possible night. He simply vanished."

Verner nodded again. "He's still in there?"

Bancroft said glumly, "Yes, he's still in there. We have a great many men on the spot, doing nothing but watch the known exits. But there's always the chance that he'll find some new way out, or knows of one, and get away. Meanwhile, we desperately need those plans. With the inventor dead, there are certain details we can clear up only from those papers. Yet, if we should get close, he just might take it into his head to destroy them. What we want to do is get to him before he realizes we're near. But how? How do we even *find* him in there?"

"Is he starving?"

"Not likely. He probably has caches of food for his longer explorations. And there's water in the caverns, if you know where to look."

"You want to get him alive, and by surprise?"

"Exactly."

"But he knows you're hunting for him in the cavern?"

"Oh, yes. We've brought in lights, and before we realized what we were up against, we set up loudspeakers and warned him to give up, or we'd come in after him. If he understood what we were saying over all the echoes, this must have amused him immensely. We could put our whole organization in there and get nothing out of a grand-scale search but sore feet, chills, and a dozen men lost in the winding passages. The thing is a standoff, and he knows it."

Verner asked thoughtfully, "And what brings you to me?"

Bancroft smiled. "We've consulted cave explorers, geologists, and all kinds of specialists without finding what we want. Then one of our men, who knows General Granger, remembered his saying he'd been helped in that mess at the hunting lodge by a 'heuristician.' We got in touch with Granger, who recommended you highly. We didn't know exactly what a 'heuristician' was—but we're prepared to try anything."

Verner laughed. "A heuristician is a professional problem solver. I work on the assumption that nearly all problems can be solved by the same basic technique, combined with expert knowledge. Some of my cases are scientific, some involve business situations, and others are purely personal problems. The details vary, but the basic technique remains the same. If the case interests me enough to take it in the first place, and if the necessary expert help is available, I can usually solve any problem—though sometimes there's an unavoidable element of luck and uncertainty."

"Well," said Bancroft, "we have plenty of experts on hand—all kinds. And I hope this problem offers enough of a challenge to interest you."

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Verner nodded. "And we'd better lose no time getting there."

Many cars and several big trucks were parked outside the main cavern entrance. From outside, electric cables coiled into the brilliantly lighted mouth of the cavern, and there was a steady throb of engines as Verner and Bancroft walked in.

"Generators," said Bancroft. "We're trying to light this end as brightly as possible, and extend the lights inward. But it's a hopeless job. I'll show you why."

They pushed past a small crowd of men, who nodded to Bancroft and glanced at Verner curiously, and then they were in a brightly lighted chamber in the rock, about forty feet long by ten high, and twelve to fourteen feet wide. Here their voices and footsteps echoed as Bancroft led the way toward the far end, where a faint breeze of cool air blew in their faces.

"So far, so good," said Bancroft, stepping around a tangle of cables and walking through a narrow doorway cut in the rock. "But here we begin to run into trouble."

He stepped back to show a long brightly lit chamber where fantastic frieze-like shapes dipped from the ceiling to meet fairy castles and miniature ranges of mountains rising from the floor. Here the electric cables that lay along the floor fanned out in all directions, to wind around huge pointed cones into the well-lighted distance.

Wherever Verner looked, the stalactites and stalagmites rose and dipped endlessly, with new chambers opening out in different directions, and as Bancroft led the way, they clambered over the uneven slanting floor past waterfalls of rock, through little grottoes, and by shapes like thrones, statues, and weird creatures from fairyland.

For a long time they walked in silence except for the echoes of their own footsteps. Then suddenly it was dark ahead. The last giant electric bulb lit the shapes of stalagmites rising one, behind the other, till the farthest ones were lost in impenetrable shadows.

A gentle breeze was still in their faces—cool, refreshing, and pure. Somewhere ahead they could hear a faint trickling of water.

"Here," said Bancroft, "we come to the end of our string. These tunnels branch, then open out into rooms, and the rooms have galleries leading off from them, and out of these galleries there are still more tunnels. They twist, wind, and occasionally they even rejoin."

His voice echoed as he talked, and he pointed off to the right. "Over there, somewhere—I think that's the direction—there's an eighty-foot sheer drop with a little stream at the bottom, and from the wall of this drop other tunnels open out in various directions and on different levels. There are eyeless fish in the stream, and a kind of blind salamander—very interesting, but our

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problem is the complex of all those tunnels. A man who knew where he was going could pick the one tunnel he wanted out of a dozen or so at any given place. But we have to follow them all. And every so often they divide again or—look up there."

Bancroft pointed to a dark opening above a slope like a frozen waterfall.

"Probably that's another one. This whole place is honeycombed, filled with diverging and connecting tunnels. It's like trying to track down someone inside a man-size termite's nest. We thought he might have left some trace, some sign of where he'd gone. We thought we could follow him with dogs. We forgot that he's practically lived in here during his spare time ever since the laboratory was set up.

"There's a superabundance of clues. Dogs have followed one track through the dark right over the edge of a sudden drop, and been killed. We can find signs that he's been just about anywhere we look. We found a pair of sneakers at one place, and a cache of food at another." Bancroft shook his head. "Let's go out. There are some people you'll want to meet, now that you've seen what it's like in here, what our problem is."

Outside, in the warm fall night, a group of men quickly gathered around Verner and Bancroft.

One, an old man in dungarees and checked shirt, was well known locally as a cave explorer. A tall man in gray business suit was the director of the government laboratory, and he repeatedly sneezed and blew his nose. A boy in dungarees and old leather jacket told how he had seen the murderer-spy enter the cave, after crossing a nearby field; he was sure it was the man they were looking for.

"Heck, we all knew him. We'd often see him go in here. He knows more about these caves than anyone—well, except maybe Gramps Peters here."

The old man laughed. "Don't fool yourself. I know old Minotaur, at the other end of this, like I know the back of my hand. But this Maze—I admit I don't know it. I was in here maybe ten years ago, got lost, wandered around for five days, drinking the water in an underground stream, and finally made my way out of a collapsed sinkhole miles away from here. That was the end of the Maze for me. Now, this man you're looking for is a different animal. He's as good as lived in there."

The laboratory director sneezed and blew his nose again. "One reason he spent so much time there, especially in the fall, was the pure air of the caverns. He was, if anything, even more allergic than I am. He once told me that the only place an active man could find recreation out of doors in the fall, if he

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suffered from hay fever, was inside a cave."

Bancroft said, "We're watching all the known exits. We've sent teams of men through those tunnels, and we've only begun to grasp the difficulties. Somehow, we've *got* to locate him—but how?"

Verner glanced at the old man. "There seems to be a slight, steady current of air in there. That doesn't come from the outside, does it?"

"Gramps" Peters shook his head. "These passages are complicated, but in this part of the cavern most of the passages slope a little uphill. Up at the other end is what they call the Minotaur. There's an underground riverbed there; no river—that's eaten its way farther down—but there's this gentle flow of cold air. I suppose the air comes from the outside somewhere, maybe from hundreds of miles away, but you wouldn't know it by the time it gets here. It seems to flow into the Minotaur, and then branch out through the Maze. It's always fresh and cool. If you get turned around in a passage, that gentle breeze, when you come to a narrow place, will tell you which way you're headed."

When Verner was finished asking questions, Bancroft took him aside.

"You see now what we're up against, Mr. Verner?"

"I suppose you've got infrared equipment?"

"Yes, and if we knew where he was, it might help us find our way to him in the dark without warning him. But it won't help to send teams of men prospecting at random through all those tunnels. The last time we tried it we found nothing, and three men were seriously injured when they came to a sudden slope." He looked at Verner tensely. "Do you have *any* suggestion, any idea at all?"

Verner nodded. "If we're lucky, and if what we've been told is true, we *may* have him out of there in a few hours."

"If you can do that, you're a miracle worker."

"No miracle at all—just common sense. But this is a case where we'll need a little luck. And we'll have to work from the upper end—from the Minotaur."

The passages of the Minotaur were larger and looked less complicated than those in the Maze. Here the gentle current of cool air seemed stronger, steadier, and could sometimes be felt even in comparatively wide passages.

Verner and Bancroft waited tensely, and then down the passage ahead came a small group, carrying a struggling man who was swearing violently.

"*Find* him?" said one of his captors, grinning. "All we had to do was follow the sounds he was making. He was sitting by a cache of food that would have lasted a week, with the plans still in his pocket."

Bancroft was looking at Verner,

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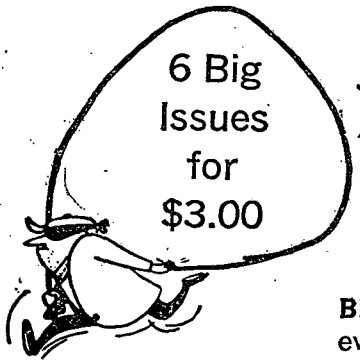
but he didn't speak. An awful choking and strangling from the prisoner made Bancroft turn in amazement. The choking and strangling noises were interspersed with violent sneezing.

Down the passage the men had stopped thrashing the stacks of ragweed, which had sent thick clouds of pollen drifting through the passage and into the Maze. The pollen had unerringly found its target—the murderer-thief who suffered from hay fever.

EDITORS' NOTE: The second in the series of problems for Richard Verner, heuristician, is titled *The Problem Solver and the Hostage*. It will appear in EQMM soon . . .



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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 288th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . an interesting "first" with surprisingly "strong" subject matter, considering the author's background . . .

Mrs. Elizabeth Denslow Robinson (née Smart) was born in 1911 in Danville, Pennsylvania. She attended St. Mary's School in Concord, New Hampshire—the school is now called St. Mary's-in-the-Mountains and is located in Littleton, New Hampshire. The death of her father, an Episcopal minister, forced her to go to work at the age of 16—for an insurance company in Hartford, Connecticut. She married Wesley Robinson, a specialist in marine insurance, in 1932, and they have two daughters, both married now, and at the time of this writing, the Robinsons have four grandchildren. Besides raising children and keeping house, Mrs. Robinson has sold women's hosiery, has "worked as a demonstrator of cheese from all nations" (demonstrator of eating cheese?), has been a newspaperwoman briefly, has been in charge of publicity for the Detroit Girl Scouts—and, always, in between, she wrote stories. Her letter ended: "I hope to write forever."

THE LONELY ZOOKEEPER

by E. D. ROBINSON

AL WAS WORRIED. HE GUESSED HE ought to speak to Young Doc about Vera. Something was wrong.

The Siberian tiger lay stretched out beneath the overhanging rock ledge that formed the inner wall of her cage. The fur across her middle rose and fell evenly. She was richly marked, black and soft yellow-tan. Al was crazy about her. The grace and power of her body in motion always fascinated him. Normally, she was ready, waiting, and anxious for her food.

But again today she just lay there.

As usual, at 4:30, people gathered to watch the feeding, but now it was late in the season, so only a few stood together on the sunlit walk. Al selected a slab of red meat and threw it on the floor of the cage. It landed near enough to Vera and with a loud enough thwack. Vera

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stirred briefly, then settled down as before.

The watchers looked disappointed. Often the tiger put on a good show, ripping and gnawing the raw meat with mighty jaws in a befitting feral manner. "Ain't that a riot!" said a fat woman in sausage-skin-tight slacks through a mouthful of popcorn. "The darn fool won't eat!" And someone else said, "Must be sick."

Yes, something must be wrong. Again today his sweetheart was drowsy and dopey, indifferent to the food. Al waited a few more minutes before taking Vera's meat away, fishing it out through the bars with a long-handled hook. Then he moved along to feed the lions.

Al loved animals, even the warm beast-smell of them. He'd worked in zoo parks in different parts of the country and liked this one best. In addition to cages, these animals had the freedom of outdoor areas, safely separated from the public by deep moats.

Part of Al's work was in the zoo gardens. With animals and flowers he could relax. With most people he couldn't. Certain people had not been kind to him. Often he felt sorry for animals, but for many years he had avoided feeling anything for people. Lately, though, there was someone who kept creeping in to occupy a place in his thoughts.

The lions devoured their meat contentedly. One of the cages held a female and two cubs. A mother with her young. Al lit a cigarette and flipped away the match. He didn't remember his own mother. She had died when he was four. But he remembered the frowsy quick-tempered woman whom Pa had married afterward. She'd kicked Al's dog nearly senseless and thrown his cat in the lake.

Pa had never once taken Al's part against her. After a while Al didn't care—his heart just grew a hard coating. He didn't even care when Pa got so sick; it just felt good that Pa couldn't get out of bed to whip him, the way he'd done so often, sometimes for a little thing like leaving the yard without permission.

When Al was 18, he left the yard for good and found a job in another town delivering groceries. He hadn't seen Pa or the woman since.

The girl he'd married—later on, after he'd done two years in the army—had been a dilly; she had squandered his money, stolen his savings, and left him for a sailor after six months. For nearly ten years now Al had given all his affection to animals. Until recently. He'd found someone he enjoyed talking to. It seemed kind of good.

All summer this tall round-shouldered guy—somewhere around 50, Al guessed—had come regularly to the zoo. Always alone, he stood for long periods by Vera's cage, watching her. He and Al had spoken on and off. Then just lately, they'd

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talked a great deal about their mutual fondness for animals, especially for Vera.

"My name's Al," Al had told him.

"You can call me Joe," the guy had said.

This past week Joe had been coming to the zoo every day. Al caught sight of him often, strolling slowly or relaxing on a bench. Sometimes he sat on the ground with his back against a tree, reading. With him he always had a large old-fashioned picnic hamper and he often stayed through the entire day, eating his meals in the park.

"It's so peaceful here," he told Al. "And what fine weather! Really superb!"

The guy talked like that—used words that Al would have felt silly if he said them. But coming out of Joe they sounded okay—not affected or anything. His own education having been slight, Al couldn't help admiring Joe.

Yesterday he had asked Joe if he was married. Then, afterward, he guessed he shouldn't have asked, because Joe took so long to answer. Finally Joe had said slowly, "No, I'm not married."

Because of his lack of expression, Al couldn't tell whether Joe was sorry about this or not. Anyway, he figured the guy was alone, like himself, and maybe sometimes wished he wasn't.

The cigarette finished, Al turned from the lions and started toward the Administration Building. The park was deserted now. In mid-September, with kids back in school, people didn't come around so much. Besides, it was almost five, closing time.

Well, not quite deserted. Pushing his cart along the wooded path, Al spied his friend, Joe, ahead on a bench. He had begun to think of him that way, as his friend. Joe was dressed as usual, somewhat oddly, in a rumpled gray suit, heavy shoes, and a stringy dark tie. His limp no-color hair was mussed by the breeze. Beside him was the picnic hamper, its lid closed so he could use it as a table for his cup and thermos. He was eating a sandwich. As Al approached Joe said, "Good evening."

"Hiya, Joe. —Been a nice day."

Joe's eyes were washed-out blue behind his dark-rimmed glasses. "Yes. Yes, it has been. Extremely restful with so few about. I've waited all summer for the crowds to thin out so that I could enjoy it here.—Perhaps I'm staying too long. In fact, I fear I must be. Is there time, I wonder, for me to finish my slight repast?"

The last of Joe's sandwich looked good. Al was hungry himself. "Sure. The main gate's closed now but you can go through the woods by Vera's cage. You know the door in the wall back there? Just pull open the bolt. It locks itself when you close it. Of course you can still get out through the main gate but the back way's closer."

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"Yes. I've used that exit before. It's right across from my house, you know. That was the main entrance not so long ago."

"Yeah—before they put in the new one. People still go out that old way a lot. Guess it really needs a better lock. Anybody could prop it open. One of these days they'll probably take it away and fill in the wall. —So you live in that big house opposite? Alone?"

"My mother was with me for a good many years, but now—yes, I'm quite alone."

"What do you do?" Al hesitated a bit, asking this, but he really wanted to know.

"Do? Oh, you mean what sort of work? None, I'm afraid. Mother left me some money and I manage on that. Also, I'm considering writing a book—just to keep busy—about animals, I think. You might be of some help to me, Al, if you're willing."

No doubt about it, the guy sure was educated! Suddenly Al felt nervous. A fish out of water was what he was around books. He said, in an off-hand way, "Sure. Anything I can do." Then, "Well, I'm going over to see Doc. Vera's not acting right."

Joe took a long drink from his cup. "I hope it's nothing serious. I'd be most unhappy if anything happened to Vera. She's a beauty. I believe she really knows me now. Lately, I feel certain she's glad to see me."

Al smiled. He was willing to share Vera's affections with Joe.

Joe rose, screwing the top on his thermos. "Well, I've finished and I must be off."

"See ya," Al said.

Joe tucked the thermos under his arm. "Good night, Al. It's always a pleasure to talk to you. I'll be thinking about Vera and hoping she's all right." He picked up the hamper by its wooden handles and scuffed away through the leaves that the wind was swirling across the ground.

Al watched him go. A kind of pitiful-looking guy. For all his money. He needed someone to look after him, keep him tidy. Suit unpressed and baggy; spots all over the front of it. Needed a friend too.

Imagine his living in that big house all by himself! To Al, who had always lived in small quarters, it seemed ridiculous. No wonder Joe came to the park so often—probably needed to get out of that house.

Al surprised himself by actually feeling sorry for Joe. Maybe some night he'd ask the guy to go to a movie. There was usually a good double feature at the Palace. On the other hand, people who wrote books scared him. He'd have to think about it.

But right now he had Vera on his mind. He went along to find Young Doc.

The next morning Al, Young

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Doc, and the headkeeper stood together in front of Vera's cage. The tiger had taken a little water, but that was all. The headkeeper looked worried. Vera was valuable—Siberians were the largest of the tiger family and rarely seen in zoos.

Tawny between her darker stripes, regal and unperturbed, Vera paced. Al watched her stop to roll and stretch her fine body in a patch of sunlight, like an overgrown house cat.

The headkeeper pulled in his lips and shook his head. "We'll put her in sick bay and keep her there a while if she doesn't eat today," he said to Young Doc as they walked away. Young Doc was taking care of things while the regular vet was on vacation. He was a nice kid, but only just out of school. This was his first job. Al hoped he knew what he was doing.

All during that warm afternoon Al worked in the dahlia beds on the opposite side of the grounds. He wished he had more time to watch Vera but there was a lot to be done around the park right now. At four o'clock he wiped the sweat from his forehead and hurried to the commissary.

Young Doc stood with him outside Vera's cage as Al threw in the meat. There were no onlookers today. Vera lay under the rock ledge. She slept heavily.

"This is the fourth day she hasn't eaten."

"It gets me." Young Doc screwed up his smooth tanned face. "If I don't find out what ails her, or if anything should happen to her, I'm liable to lose my job."

Al didn't think he could stand it if anything happened to Vera. He hardly dared say what had occurred to him. "She couldn't be poisoned, could she?"

"Might be. I don't know. Listen, Al, I've got to go home now. My wife phoned—she doesn't feel well. The baby's due any minute, you know, and she's kind of nervous with this first one. I promised her I'd be home for supper. But I'll be back later—probably about eight."

"Okay. I'll grab a bite, then I'll come back and stick around."

When Young Doc had gone, Al stood for a moment by Vera's cage. Then, as he turned away, his eyes caught a movement at the edge of the woods. Joe was there, ambling along, carrying his hamper. Al raised a hand in greeting. But Joe didn't come over. He waved, then moved off toward the old gate.

As Joe walked away, the back of his sloping shoulders looked so pathetic that Al nearly forgot about Vera. A guy like that ought to have a plump, good-natured wife. Joe must feel awfully lonely at times. Al knew. Days it wasn't so bad—he was busy doing what he enjoyed; but there were other times when the loneliness got to him and he would have given anything to have someone to talk to. Anybody. Just talk. Not get involved.

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While Al ate his supper at the counter in a nearby hamburger joint he read a morning paper he'd picked up off one of the park benches. People were always in trouble—his eyes flicked over the headlines—shooting each other, double-crossing each other, divorcing each other, getting food poisoning, speeding and getting smashed up; the world sure was a mess.

Some young girl had disappeared—been missing a week. Well, so what? Maybe she wanted to disappear. Some people did. Maybe she'd gone off with a man. Some girls did that too. They sure did! Al glanced at the clock on the wall over the cigarette machine. He had time to waste, so he read on.

The young girl, Sally Brett, had a mother who had notified Missing Persons. She also had a husband, who was not at all worried and wanted to know what all the fuss was about. He thought she might be visiting a friend. He had practically told his wife's mother to mind her own business. Sally, he said, had left nearly all the expensive clothes he'd bought for her in the closet, including a mink coat. Sally, he said, would be back, if only to get the coat.

I'll say! Al agreed. But the newspaper story wasn't getting his full attention because it was flanked by an ad showing a luscious girl in a bikini. Hell, he thought, it's been a long time!

He picked up the plastic bottle and squirted ketchup on his burger, then he went back to the Sally Brett story and took a closer look at her picture. Mouth smeared, big and pouty; eyelashes made up and everything; her hand up to her cheek, coy-like; a great big ring on her finger. Al had seen a hundred like her. He knew the type. What a crummy world! Everybody gimme gimme gimme.

Disgustedly, he folded the paper and put it aside. He hated to be reminded of his own former wife. Squeeze a man dry, then toss him away like a used lemon as soon as a bigger and juicier lemon came along.

He ordered a second cup of coffee and a slice of apple pie from the blonde behind the counter. Her bottom was small and round and had a certain way of pushing against her skirt when she moved. He felt like pinching it. When she came back with the pie and coffee he looked into her blue eyes briefly. They were hard and knowing. Hell, nothing ever turned out!

He sipped his coffee and watched the girl's bottom. After a while he finished the pie, paid his bill, went outside, and spat viciously on the pavement.

It was nearly eight and the darkness had a navy-blue look when he met Young Doc in front of Vera's cage in the circle of light from a tall park lamp. Young Doc carried a flashlight like his own and half of

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a small cardboard box. "Sorry to keep you so late, Al."

"That's okay. I've nothing to do." He wondered how late the blonde worked at the hamburger joint.

"Well, I felt I had to go home. Wife's pretty nervous. No baby yet. —Now, first I want to have a look around the cage. Vera's out by the moat. Close the opening, Al, so she won't come in."

Al unlocked the cage. He tugged the steel bars down over the low opening that led to Vera's outer area. He waited while Young Doc flashed his light around.

"What do you expect to find?"

"I really don't know. She might have thrown up. And I want to look for droppings. I suppose it would be better to do this in the daylight, but I'm rather anxious. I don't want to wait until morning. Wife might have the baby and then I'd be tied up."

Young Doc moved away, poking around, the cardboard box ready in his hand for anything he might find.

Al leaned against the rocks and looked through the open top of the cage at the early stars. A long pale finger from a huge arc light somewhere—advertising cars, probably —traveled repeatedly across the sky. It was a quiet night. But noisy too, if you knew how to listen. Bug sounds; persistent buzzing, intermittent chirpings; the low hum of city traffic; the toot of a horn; a sudden screech of brakes. Somewhere, not far off, he heard voices and laughter.

A cool breeze stirred the leaves in the deserted park. Al shifted a little and saw the outlines of the peaked roof of Joe's house across the street. What did Joe have to go home to? Nothing. The same as Al. Having money didn't make a house any less lonely, did it? He really ought to go and see Joe. Maybe tomorrow night he'd just drop over. Unless he saw him during the day. Then perhaps he'd just mention getting together or something. Maybe Joe liked to play cards. Al would be okay there. Cards he understood.

Funny thing, but he was certainly drawn toward Joe. Oh, he'd never give another woman a chance. To hell with the blonde in the hamburger joint! With Joe it was different. They were both alone, both without love. Al was afraid of love. You could jump from love to quite another feeling pretty fast. He knew. He'd loved his father. Once. And he'd loved his wife. But he'd felt hate for her too, that day he found out about her stealing his money and giving it to that stinking sailor. It had taken all his strength to control his emotions. She'd got out of the apartment just in time.

Young Doc was saying something. "Saw you talking to Joe Brett today. Have they found his wife?"

"Joe who?"

"Joe Brett. Comes around here

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all the time. Lives right over there." Young Doc gestured. "His wife went away last week and nobody seems to know where or why. He used to teach at some school—I can't remember which one; anyway, he got fired for making passes at one of the students. Then he married this twenty-year-old girl. He must be fifty if he's a day. Some people!"

"Did you say Brett? Joe Brett?" He'd never known Joe's last name.

"Yeah. Did he say anything about his wife? Whether they'd found her?"

Al stood absolutely still. Joe had said he wasn't married.

"Doc, are you sure the guy you saw me with is Joe—Brett?"

"Of course. My wife's folks knew his mother. They used to say his mother ruined him, made him a nambypamby. Then she died and he seemed to change, got kind of wild. After he married this girl, Sally, he got namby-pamby again. It's the same guy all right. My wife's mother talks about him a lot—seems to worry about him. You know how women are."

A strange thing was happening to Al. Something awful. Instinctively he tried to fight it, but his insides started going around as if an egg beater was churning them up. Hotness seemed to envelop him and his heart started pounding so that he could almost taste it. He ran his tongue over dry lips and his hands were clammy. He felt sick.

With savage force he clenched his fists. He saw that Young Doc, who had been bending over in one corner, straightened up now and turned around. "Well, I've got a few samples. Now, I guess we'd better get the truck and take her over where I can keep an eye on her for a few days."

Al moved slowly. He was trying hard not to shake. Vera. He almost said it out loud. Vera. There's nothing wrong with you. There's nothing wrong at all. He wished there was. In the middle of the cage he stopped. He had trouble focusing his eyes. Then Young Doc's face was there in front of him.

Al heard himself say, "Doc, there's something I guess I gotta tell you."

Hours later Al sank onto a bench near Vera's cage. The sun was barely up. Vera was somewhere off in the moat area and Al was glad he couldn't see her. He hunched forward, clasping and unclasping his hands which hung between his knees.

Well, he'd told them. He'd had to do it. But how he wished he hadn't gone with them to Joe's house! Only because he, Al—a friend—seemed to be standing there alone did Joe let them in.

He'd never forget the look on Joe's face when the others stepped out of the shadows and the four of them advanced toward Joe—a cou-

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ple of police detectives, Al, and Young Doc.

A picture of the girl was there too. He saw it on the table in the front room. And her hand with the big ring on it was up to her cheek the same way, coy-like. Sally Brett, the missing girl.

Al wrung his hands. If only he hadn't followed the older detective into Joe's kitchen and been right there behind him when he opened the refrigerator door! Some parts of the human body you can't dispose of very easily.

But he hadn't wanted to stay in the front room and see them holding Joe down on the floor like that. He hadn't wanted to hear Joe's shrill, unnatural voice screaming his hatred of women; boasting of his cleverness with the lock on the old gate; telling about sneaking into the park with his dreadfully burdened hamper.

Al got up and started to walk. On the path he came to a sign that read: *Please Don't Feed the Animals.*

He went into the bushes and threw up.

Afterward, he made his way over to the duck pond. He dropped on the sloping bank and buried his face in the cold wet grass. He hit the ground weakly with his fists and shivered a little from the dampness seeping through his clothes. Hell, the world sure was cockeyed! How come something always found a way to keep that coating around his heart from softening?

After a while he sat up. He watched five ducks glide by in perfect formation. He concentrated hard on the pattern of ripples they made in the still pond and tried to think about something nice and plain and ordinary and normal. Like Young Doc, who'd finally got around to phoning his wife and was with her right now, in some hospital, while she was having a baby.

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JUST ENOUGH TO COVER A THUMBNAIL

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

I KNEW WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO wake up after being drunk the night before—everyone does, I guess—but that wasn't in it compared to what this was like. This had all the same symptoms of the other, and then some new ones of its own. My mouth felt just as dry and my head felt just as heavy and my stomach felt just as bad. And then in addition, my eyes wouldn't focus right—everything I looked at seemed to have rings around it; and my hands were cold and clammy, and my teeth were on edge, as though I'd been chewing lemons.

But worse than anything else was the mental conditioning it had left behind; I was afraid. I was as afraid as a seven-year-old kid in an old dark house. And when you're afraid at one o'clock of a blazing bright afternoon, mister, you're afraid.

And at that, the after-effects were nothing compared to what the symptoms had been like the night before, while I was still under it. I grabbed my eyes tight to shut out the recollection, and if I'd had an extra pair of hands I'd have stopped up my ears at the same time. But the images were inside, in my memory, where I couldn't get at them. Blurred, but there.

He was a fellow I'd known slightly—so slightly that I didn't even know his last name; just Joe. Joe said, "Aw, you need cheering up. Come on with me, I'm going somewhere that'll cheer you up." And then, probably an hour later, the parting hand on my shoulder.

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"Take it easy, be seeing you around, I'm blowing now."

I remembered saying, "Well, just a sec, I'll go with you. I came here with you after all."

I remember the knowing wink he'd given me. "Naw, you better hang around a while; I'm taking that girl in green home. You know how it is, two's company—" Exit Joe, whoever he was.

So I stayed on there, like a fool, in a strange place with strangers.

The rest of it came crowding back on me, all mixed up like what they call montage in the movies. The man with the white scar on his jaw. I kept seeing that white scar, hearing disconnected things he'd said. "Just enough to cover your thumbnail. Always remember that and you can never go wrong; just enough to cover your thumbnail. Then you bring it up the long way, like you were going to wipe your nose." . . . "Nice-looking place, isn't it? You want it, you can have it. Listen, I'd give away anything tonight. Make yourself at home, I'll be right back." . . . "What'd you do, have some trouble in here while I was gone? Look at that, look at the blood all over your shirt!" . . . "No, you can't get out that way! That's a dead window, you fool! Can't you see by looking at it? It's nailed down fast, it's painted over. They built a house right up next to this, and the brick work sealed it up." . . . "Aw, that's nothing; you want that to go away? I'll show you how to make that go away. Now hold steady. Just enough to cover your thumbnail. Watch and see how that makes it go away." . . . "Don't get excited, I'm not going anywhere. Just wait here for me, I'll be right back —"

And then it got worse and worse. At the end it was almost a frenzy, a delirium. Of fear and flight and pursuit. The very walls had seemed to whisper. "Look at him, sitting there waiting! They'll get him, they'll get him!"

They seemed to sing, too. Music kept oozing out of them. Ghost music. I could hear it so plain, I could even recognize some of the tunes, I could even remember them now! *Alice Blue Gown, Out on a Limb, Oh, Johnny,* and the *Woodpecker Song.*

And then the climactic madness, the straining, tugging trip to the closet along the floor; the frantic closing of the door; the locking of it, on what it held; the secreting of the key in my pocket; the piling up and barricading of it with a table, a chair, anything and everything I could lay my hands on. Then flight, through the labyrinth of the city, hiding in doorways, sidling around corners, hugging the shadows. Flight that went on forever. From —where? To—where? Then kindly oblivion at last.

All of it a junk dream, of course. But needles of cold sweat came out

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on my forehead even now, it was still so vivid, so haunting.

I didn't know what to do for a hangover of this kind. But I figured water, lots of cold water inside and out, was good for almost anything under the sun, so it ought to be good for this too. At least it couldn't hurt it any.

I staggered rubber-kneed into the bathroom and filled the washbowl and sloshed my eyes, and ducked my whole face in it, and slapped it across the back of my neck. After I got through, I felt a little better. Not a lot, though.

I went back to my room and combed my soaked hair and started to get dressed. If I'd had a job I would have been out of it by now, I'd overslept so long. But I didn't have one anyway, so it didn't make any difference.

Just after I'd got my shoes and trousers on, Mildred knocked on the door. She'd heard me moving around, I guess. I told her to come in. I was ashamed to look at her, but only I knew the real reason why; she didn't. She looked in and said, "Hello, Tommy. I guess you had a drink or two too many last night."

I thought, "I only wish it was that!" I was sorrier than ever the thing had happened.

"I understand how it is—it helps to take your mind off your troubles once in a while." Then she rested a hand on my arm for a minute, to show she didn't mean it for criticism. "But don't do too much of it, Tommy. It doesn't make it any easier to get a job. I'll fix you some coffee, that'll brace you up."

She was my older sister. She was swell. I was not only living with her, but she'd even been keeping me in pocket money since I'd been out of a job. She went out again, and I went ahead with my dressing.

First I was going to put on a clean shirt, but I thought I better not be too extravagant while I was out of work, so I decided I'd stick to the old one a day more. The way it was folded or rumpled must have hidden the stain. I only saw it after I had the shirt on, and tucked into my belt, and was buttoning it down in front of the glass. It was brown, a sort of splashy stain in front.

I stared at it in a sort of paralyzed horror. I don't think I moved for about two minutes. Finally I touched it, and where it was brown it was stiff. Good and stiff. "What'd you do, have some trouble in here? Look at the blood all over your shirt!" It rang in my ears again. So that part of it was real at least, it hadn't been just a snow mirage.

All right, it was real. But it had to come from somewhere. It didn't just appear from nowhere, like a miraculous stigmata. I pulled the shirt up out of my belt, and hoisted my undershirt, and scanned my body, all around the lower ribs. There wasn't a scratch on me anywhere. I looked higher up, on my

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chest. I even rolled up my sleeves and looked at both arms. There wasn't a nick anywhere on my skin. And whatever had bled that much must have been a pretty good-sized gash.

So it had come from someone else.

I finished dressing. I kept talking it into myself that it meant nothing. "Somebody you were with cut himself on something. You don't remember it, that's all. How'd it get on me, then? Well, maybe you were lurching around. You leaned up against someone, or someone did against you. You better quit thinking about it. You want to hang onto your self-control, don't you? Then quit thinking about it."

Which was a lot easier said than done, but I finished up my dressing, put on my coat. The last stage of all was what everyone's last stage usually is. To put my change, matches, keys, whatever loose accessories there were, back into my pockets where they belonged.

Even in last night's befogged condition, habit had been strong enough to assert itself. The stuff was dumped out on top of the bureau, the way I always found it every morning. I started collecting it item by item, dropping each category into the particular pocket where it belonged. Three nickels and a dime. (I'd started out with thirty-five cents last night, I distinctly remembered that, so I must have spent a dime sometime during the course of the night; I couldn't remember doing it.) A withered pack that contained a last cigarette—broken into two sections from pocket pressure. I put one into my mouth, threw the other away. And last of all, my keys—one that Mildred and Denny had given me to the apartment here, and the other a little jigger that opened my valise.

This time I didn't stand staring in frozen horror. The half cigarette fell from my relaxed lips to the floor, and I lurched forward, steadied myself by gripping the front edge of the bureau. I stayed that way, sort of hunched over, goggling down at it.

There was one key too many there.

There were three keys staring me in the face, and up to last night I had only two. There was a strange key there mixed up with my own two, a key that didn't belong to me, a key I'd never seen before. Or at least, only in a—snow flurry.

It wasn't one of these modern, brass, safety-lock keys; it was an old-fashioned iron thing, dun-colored, with an elongated stem and two teeth at the end of it shaped like a buzzsaw. The kind of a key used in an old-fashioned house, that has old-fashioned rooms with old-fashioned doors.

It was an interior key. I mean, you could see it wasn't for an outside door, a street door, but for some door on the inside of a house—a room door or a closet door.

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That gave me a shot in the arm, that last word. I straightened up from my leapfrog position and did things around the room fast. First, I gave it the benefit of the doubt—although I knew as sure as I was born I'd never seen it before in my life, that it didn't belong around here. I went over to my own closet with it, to try it on that. It wouldn't go in, because the closet's own key was sticking out, blocking the keyhole. Then I went to my room door, but there wasn't anywhere on that to try it. It had no lock at all; it closed on a little horizontal bolt run into a hole. There wasn't any place else for me to match it up with.

It came from somewhere outside. Somewhere in a dope dream.

Then the panic came on again from last night, only now it was worse, because this was broad daylight and now I was in my right senses. I swung out my valise and kicked the lid up. I didn't have much to pack, so it didn't take long. But everything there was to pack, I packed.

I'd gotten halfway down the short little hall with my bag in my hand when Mildred looked out and saw me. She gave a little moaning protest, ran after me. "No, Tommy—what're you doing?"

"I've got to go. Don't stop me, I've got to get out of here."

"No, Tommy—what is it?" She took the valise and set it down. I let her. I didn't want to go myself, that was why I stood there undecided. But yet, I knew I couldn't stay—not now.

"I've got to, I tell you!"

"But why? Where? You have no money." She took me by the arm and coaxed me into the kitchen. "At least drink a cup of coffee before you go, don't leave like this; I just made it fresh."

It was just a stall, she only wanted to gain time. I knew that, but I slumped into a chair anyway, and cradled my head, and leaned way over my own lap, staring down at the floor.

I heard her slip out to the phone when she thought I wasn't noticing, but I didn't try to interfere. I heard her saying in a guarded voice, "Denny, will you come home right away? See if you can get relieved from duty and come home right away—it's very important."

He was a detective. In one way, I wanted to talk to him very much. In another way, I didn't.

I guess I must have wanted to more than I didn't want to, because I was still sitting there when he showed up. He got there quickly, not more than ten or fifteen minutes after she'd phoned him.

He came striding in looking worried, and tossed his hat onto the seat of a chair. He was a slow-moving, even-tempered guy as a rule, misleadingly genial on the surface, hard as nails inside. Mildred and I, of course, only saw him when he was off duty, we hadn't had much

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chance to see the latter quality in him. I only suspected it was there, without being sure. I had him sized up for the kind of man who would give you a break if you deserved one, or crack down on you like granite if you didn't.

He spoke to her first. "What's the matter?"

"It's Tommy," she said. "He packed his things and wants to leave. You better talk to him, Denny. I'll leave the two of you alone if you want me to."

"No," he said. "Come on, we'll go in your room, Tom." He brought the bag in with him and closed the door after the two of us.

He sat down on the edge of my bed and looked at me, waiting. I stayed up. Nothing came, so finally he said patiently, "What's the matter, kid?"

I gave it to him right away. What was the good of paying it out slow? I said, "I think I killed a man last night."

He churned that around in his mind, without taking his eyes off me. Then he said, "You *think?* Listen, that's a thing you usually can be pretty sure of. You either did or didn't. Now which is it?"

"I was kind of fuzzy at the time."

"Well, who was he?"

"I don't know."

"Where did it happen?"

"I don't know that either."

"You don't know *where* or *who* or *if*—" He gave me a half-rebuking, half-whimsical look. "I don't get it, Tom. You don't look yourself today. You look a little funny. And you sure sound a whole lot that way."

"Yes, that's it," I said bitterly. "I better start from the beginning and try to tell you as much as I can."

"You better," he agreed drily.

"There won't be very much. At 11:30 last night I was standing on a corner waiting to cross with the light when a guy I knew by sight happened along. I don't know who he is or where I knew him from—just that I'd seen his face some place before—fellow named Joe. I told him I was down in the dumps and he said I needed cheering up. He asked me to come with him and like a sap I went.

"I can remember that much clearly. He took me to some apartment where there was a big party going on. I don't even know just where *that* was—down on one of the side streets off Kent Boulevard somewhere. I didn't know anyone there, and I can't remember that he bothered introducing me. They seemed a sort of free and easy bunch, no questions asked; it was almost like open house—new people kept showing up all the time and old ones leaving. He left, and when I tried to go with him, he gave me some excuse and shoved off alone, leaving me there.

"From then on it gets all woozy. It was late and there were fewer people. The lights got dimmer and the place got quieter, people talk-

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ing in whispers. There was some guy with a white scar along his jaw. I remember he seemed to be watching me for a long while. Finally he came over and offered me something—"

This was the part that was hardest to tell him, but I had to if he was to make any sense out of it.

"Offered you what?" he said.

"I thought it was a headache powder first. He told me to stick my thumb out, and he sifted it onto the nail, from a little paper."

He just asked the question with his eyes this time. I looked down at the floor. "Coke," I murmured half audibly.

"You damn fool," he said. "You ought to have your head examined!"

"I was feeling low; I thought if it would make me forget my troubles for even half an hour it would be worth it. You don't know what it's like to be without a job for months, to mooch off your relatives—"

"Well, get drunk then, if you have to," he said scathingly. "Get so pie-eyed you fall down flat on your face—I'll pay your liquor bill myself! But if you ever go for that stuff again, I'll break your jaw!"

Again was good. There didn't have to be a next time; all the damage had been done the first time. I finished up the rest of it. It came easier once I'd gotten past that point. "—and I piled stuff up in front of it, and I beat it out of there, and I don't remember getting home."

He hinged his palm up and down on his knee once or twice before he said anything. "Well, whaddya expect if you go monkeying around like that," he growled finally, "to dream of honeysuckle and roses? It's a wonder you didn't imagine you stuffed six dead guys into a closet instead of just one."

"But do you think *that's* what got me rattled?" I expostulated. I held my head tight between both hands. "I found the key on the bureau when I got dressed a little while ago! And his blood on my shirt!" I hauled it out and waved it at him. I pitched the key down and it went *clunk!* and bounced once and then lay still.

And his face showed me I'd made my point. He picked the key up first and turned it over and over. You could tell he wasn't so much looking at it as thinking the whole thing over. Then he traced a fingernail back and forth across the stain once or twice. Also absentmindedly.

"A knife," he murmured. "A bullet wound wouldn't have bled that much—not on *you*. Can you remember a knife? Can you remember holding one? Have you looked —around here?"

I shuddered. "Don't tell me I brought *that* back here with me too!"

He flipped up both thumbs out of his entwined hands. "After all,

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you brought the key, didn't you?"

He got up from the bed to look for it around the room. And then he didn't have to—it was there. His getting up had unearthed it.

The bedsprings he'd been pressing down twanged out, settled into place again. Something fell through to the floor with a small, soft thud. Something that had evidently been sheathed between them and the mattress all night.

He picked up a scabbard of tightly folded newspaper, with a brown spot or two on it. He opened it—and there it was. With one of those trick blades that spring out of the hilt. Not even cleaned off.

All he said was, "This don't look so good, does it, Tom?"

I stared at it. "I don't even remember slipping it under there. It isn't mine, I never owned it or carried it—" I took a couple of crazy half turns around the room without getting anywhere. "You haven't told me yet what I'm going to do."

"I'll tell you what you're *not* going to do; you're not going to lam out. You're going to stay right here until we find out just what this thing is." He rewrapped the knife, this time in a large handkerchief of his own. "Here's how it goes. There's a possibility, and a damn good one, that there's some guy stuffed in a closet, in some room of some house, somewhere in this city at this very minute—and that you killed him last night under the influence of cocaine. Now he's going to be found sooner or later. *But we've got to find him first*— do you get that? We've got to know ahead of time, before it breaks, whether you did kill him or not."

He stepped up and grabbed me hard by the shoulder. "Now if you did, you're going to take the knock for it, I'm telling you that here and now. That's the way I play. But if you didn't—" He opened his hand and let my shoulder go. "We've got to get to him first, otherwise I'll never be able to clear you."

"I think I did, Denny," I breathed low. "I think I did—but I'm not sure."

"That's a chance we'll have to take. And I'm pulling for you—for Mildred's sake, and yours—and even my own. I don't exactly hate you, you know."

"Thanks, Denny." I gripped hands with him for a minute. "If it turns out it was me, I'm game, I'm willing to—"

But he had no more time for loving cups. He was on a case now. He took out an envelope and a pencil stub so worn down that the lead point practically started right out of the eraser. He sat down, turned over one foot, and began to use his shoe for a writing board. He used the back of the envelope to jot on.

"What are you doing?" I asked, half terrified in spite of myself by these preliminaries to police activ-

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ity, even though they were still confined to my own bedroom.

"I always plot out my line of investigation ahead of time." He showed me what he'd written:

1. *"Joe."*
2. *Whereabouts of party flat.*
3. *Man with white scar.*
4. *Location of room with singing walls.*

"See the idea? One leads into the other consecutively. Interlocking steps. It'll save a lot of time and energy. 'Joe' gives us the party flat, the party flat gives us the man with the scar, the man with the scar gives us the room with the singing walls. That gives us a closet with a dead man in it you either did or did not kill. A lot of dicks I know would try to jump straight from the starting point to the closet with the body in it. And land exactly in the middle of nowhere. My way may seem more roundabout, but it's the surer and quicker way."

He put the envelope away. "Now we disregard everything else and concentrate on 'Joe' first. Until we've isolated 'Joe,' none of the other factors exist for us. Now sit down a minute and just think about 'Joe,' to the exclusion of everything else. His whole connection with it occurred before you were stupefied by that damnable stuff, so it shouldn't be as hard as what comes later."

It shouldn't, but it was.

"You absolutely can't place him, don't know where you had seen him before?"

"Absolutely not."

"Let me see if I can't build him up for myself, then. What'd he talk about on the way over to this place? You didn't just walk side by side in stony silence."

"No."

"Well gimme some of that. Maybe I can get a line on him from that."

I dredged my mind futilely. Disconnected snatches were all that would come back; it hadn't been an important conversation.

"He said, 'Aw, don't think you're the only one has troubles. Look at me, I'm working but I might just as well not be. A lot I get out of it! Caged up all day, for a lousy fifty a week.'"

"And didn't you ask him what his job was?"

"No. He seemed to take it for granted I knew all about him, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings by letting him see I hardly remembered him from Adam. Besides, I didn't particularly care anyway, I had my own worries on my mind."

"Well, is that all he said the whole way over?"

"That's all that amounted to anything. The rest were just irrelevant remarks that people make to one another strolling along the street, like 'Did you see that blonde just passed?' and 'Boy, there's a car I'd like to own!'"

"Let me decide whether they

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were irrelevant or not," he said impatiently. "I never throw anything away."

"I've given you about all there were. Then when we got to this place, I heard him say, 'Well, here we are,' and he turned in. So I went in after him without particularly noticing where it was. The flat turned out to be on the second floor; it was an elevator building, but the car was in use or something. I remember him saying, 'Come on, let's take the stairs for a change,' and he headed for them without waiting, like he was in a hurry to get up there, so I followed him."

Denny drove fingernails into his hair. "Not much there, is there? Fifty a week. Caged up all day. We'll have to try to figure him out from those two chance remarks. Caged up all day. Bank teller? They get more than that."

"I've never had enough money on me at one time to go near a bank."

"Cashier maybe, in some cafeteria or diner where you've been going?" He answered that himself before I had a chance to. "No, you've been taking your meals home with us since you're out of work. Not a ticket seller in a movie house, they use girls for that. And you never go to stage shows, where they use men in the box office."

"No," I agreed.

"Caged up all day." He kept saying it over to himself, trying to make it click. "Change booth on the transportation system maybe, on the station you used to use going to work every day?"

"No, I know both the guys on shift there, Callahan and O'Donnell."

"Pawnbroker's clerk, maybe. You've been patronizing them pretty frequently of late, haven't you?"

"Yes, but that's Benny, I know him real well—by now."

"I can see where this Joe's going to be a tough nut to crack." He mangled the pinfeathers at the back of his head. "It might have been just an idle expression—it don't have to mean he's actually in a cage, literally behind some sort of bars or wicket. But it's the only lead you've given me on him so far, and I'm blamed if I'm going to pass it up! Are you sure you can't dig up something else, Tommy?"

I couldn't have if my life depended on it. Well, it did in a way, and even so I couldn't. I just eyed him helplessly.

He got tough. Tough with himself, I mean. I guess he always did, when something showed signs of getting the better of him. "Well, I'm gonna get it if I sit here in this room until cobwebs form all over me!" he snarled.

He raised his head alertly after a moment. "How'd they act at the door? What'd they say to him at the door?"

"Nothing. He thumped it, and I guess it was opened by whoever

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happened to be standing closest to it, a visitor there himself, just like we were. He didn't say a word to us, and we didn't say a word to him, just made our way in."

"Pretty free and easy," he grunted. He gnawed at it some more, like a dog with a bone. "You say he was kind of in a hurry to get up there?"

"No, not on the street he didn't seem to be. We just ambled along, the two of us. He took plenty of time. He stopped and looked at some shirts in a window. Then another time he went in a minute and bought a pack of cigarettes."

"But you said—"

"That was after we got in the entrance. Like I said, the elevator was in use, or at least on its way down to us. I remember the little red light over the shaft was lit up, and the indicator showed it was already down past the second floor. It would only have taken a minute more for it to reach us. But he didn't seem to want to bother waiting. He said, 'Come on, we'll take the stairs for a change—' "

"That don't make sense. On the street he's not in a hurry, but once in the building he's in too much of a sweat to wait. Either a person's in a hurry to get some place the *whole* time, or not at all."

Suddenly he uncoiled so suddenly I jumped back from him. "I've got it!" he said. "I got something out of that! See, I told you it never pays to throw away anything." He stabbed his finger at me accusingly. "Your unknown friend 'Joe' is an elevator operator! I'm sure of it. Fifty a week would be right for that. And he wasn't in a hurry when he took the stairs inside that building! He was just sick of riding in elevators, glad for an excuse to walk up for a change."

He looked at me hopefully, waiting for my reaction. "Well, does it do anything to you, does it mean anything to you, does it click? *Now* do you place him?" He could tell by my face. "Still don't, eh?" He took a deep breath, settled down for some more digging. "Well, you've evidently ridden up and down in his car with him more than a few times, and he took that to be sufficient basis for an acquaintanceship. Some fellows are that way, without meaning any harm. Then again, some could be that way—meaning plenty of harm. Now: where have you gone more than once or twice where you've had occasion to use an elevator?"

I palmed my forehead hopelessly. "Gosh, I've been in so many office buildings all over town looking for a job, I don't think I've missed one!"

Right away he made it seem less hopeless, at least trimmed it down. "But it would have to be a place where you were called back at least a second time, probably talked to him about it riding up to the interview. Were there any?"

"Plenty," I told him grimly.

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"Well, here's your part of the assignment—and take it fast, we haven't got a hell of a lot of time, you know. You revisit every such place you can recall being in the past few months, where you *nearly* got a job, had to go back two or three times. Meanwhile, I'm going to get to work on this knife, slip it in at Fingerprints as a personal off-the-record favor, and see just what comes off it, how heavily it counts against you—"

He took out a fountain pen, spattered a couple of drops of ink onto a piece of paper, and made an improvised ink pad by having me stroke it with my fingertips. "Now press down hard on this clean piece, keep them steady. Homemade but effective. I'll make the comparison myself while I'm down there, without letting anyone in on it—for the present. I'll probably be back here before you are—I'm going to get sick leave until we've broken this thing down. You call me back here at the house the minute you have any luck with this Joe. And don't take too long, Tom; it's almost mid-afternoon already. Any minute somebody's liable to step up to a certain closet in a certain house, and try to open it, and do something about it when they find it's locked —"

I flitted out, on that parting warning, with a face the color of a sheet that's had too much blueing used on it. He stopped me a minute just as I got the door open, and added, "Mildred's out of this, get that straight."

"I should hope so," I said almost resentfully. What did he think I was?

I could remember most of the places I'd been around to fairly recently looking for openings. I mean, the ones where I'd been told to come back, and then when I had, somebody else had walked off with the job anyway. I revisited them one by one.

Some of them were old-fashioned buildings with just one rickety elevator; they were easy to cover. Others were tall modern structures serviced by triple and quadruple tiers of them, and a starter posted out front to give them the buzzer. In places like that I had to stand where I could command all the car doors and wait until they'd all opened to reveal the operators' faces. And even then I wasn't satisfied. I'd ask each starter, "Is there anyone named Joe working the cars here?" He might be at home sick or he might be on a later shift.

I always got: "Joe who?"

"Just Joe," I'd have to say. "Joe Anybody."

Once I got a Joe Marsala that way, but he turned out to be an undersized, Latin-looking youth, not what I wanted. No sign of the vague, phanton Joe who had, voluntarily or involuntarily, led me into murder.

At five to four, or nearly an hour after I'd left Denny, I finally ran

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out of places where I could remember having been job hunting. I knew there must have been others, so to make sure of getting them all, I went back to the employment agency where I'd been registered for a time to see if a look at their files wouldn't help my memory. I figured they must keep a record of where they sent their applicants, even the unsuccessful ones.

I phoned Denny from there, from a little soft-drink parlor on the ground floor, all winded from excitement. "I got him! I got him! I came back here to the employment agency to get a record of more places where I was sent to—and he was here the whole time! He runs the car right in this building!"

"Has he seen you yet?" he asked briskly.

"No, I got a look at him first, and I figured I better tell you before I—"

"Wait where you are," he ordered. "Don't let him see you until I get down there." I gave him the address and he hung up.

I kept walking back and forth on the sidewalk in front of the entrance, to make sure he didn't give me the slip before Denny got there. He couldn't see me from where he was—the elevator was set pretty far back in the lobby. I was plenty steamed up. Kind of frightened too. We were a step nearer to murder. A murder it looked as if I'd done. A murder I was pledged to take the rap for, if it turned out I had.

Denny came fast. "In here?" he said briefly.

"Y-yeah," I stammered. "There's only one car and he's running it right now."

"Stay out here," he said curtly, "I'll go in and get him." I guess he wanted to catch Joe off guard, not tip his hand by letting him see me with him right at the beginning. Then with a comprehending look at my twitching face muscles, he threw at me: "Buck up. Don't go all to pieces—too early in the game for that yet." And went in.

They came out together in about five minutes, after he'd asked the first few preliminary questions.

It was him all right. He was in uniform now, and he looked pretty white and shaky. I guess the shock of the badge hadn't worn off yet. Denny said, "This your acquaintance?"

"Yeah," I said. I waited to see if he'd deny it. He didn't. He turned and said to me querulously, "What'd you do, get me in wrong? I didn't mean nothing by taking you there with me last night. What happened after I left, was there something swiped from the place?"

Which was a pretty good out for himself—I didn't have to be a detective to recognize that. In other words, he was just an innocent link in the chain of circumstances leading to murder.

If Denny felt that way about it, he didn't show it. He gave him a shake that started at the shoulder

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and went rippling down him like a shimmy. "Cut out the baby stuff, Fraser," he said. "Now are you going to talk while we're waiting for the van?" Which was just to throw a scare into him; I hadn't seen him put in a call for a van since he'd gotten here.

Denny took out an envelope with his free hand and showed me the back of it. "Sorrell—795—Alcazar, Apt. 2 B," he'd penciled on it. He'd gotten the name and location of the party flat out of Joe. I didn't know what more he wanted with him. It seemed he just wanted to find out whether Joe'd been in on anything or not. "How many times had you been up there before last night?"

"Only once before."

"How'd you happen to go up there in the first place?"

"My job before this, I was deliveryman for a liquor store near there. I was sent over with a caseful one night, and they were having a big blowout, and they invited me in. They're that kind of people, sort of goofy. They used to be in vaudeville. Now they follow the races around from track to track. Half the time they're broke, but every once in a while they make a big killing on some long shot, and then they go on a spree, hold sort of open house. People take advantage of them, word gets around, don't ask me how, and before they're through they've got people they don't even know crashing in on them."

"But how'd you happen to know there was going to be a party last night, when you took this fellow up there with you?"

"I didn't for sure, I just took a chance on it. If there hadn't been anything doing, I would have gone away again. But it turned out they had a bigger mob than ever. They didn't even remember me from the time before, but that didn't make no difference, they told me to make myself at home anyway. They were both kind of stewed by that time."

"You make fifty a week chauffeuring that cracker box in there, right? How much did they charge you up there?"

"I don't get you," Fraser faltered. "They didn't charge me anything. It isn't a place where you pay admission—"

Denny gave him a twist of the arm. "Come on, you knew what they were passing around up there. How were you able to afford it? Did you get yours free for steering newcomers?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, honest I don't," he quavered.

"You didn't know that was a dope flat?" Denny slashed at him mercilessly.

Joe's consternation was too evident to be anything but genuine. I think even Denny felt that. I thought he was going to cave in for a minute. I never saw a guy get so frightened in my life before.

"Holy smoke—!" he exhaled. "I never noticed nothing like that—I

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saw this girl in green and I took a shine to her, and the two of us blew the place after about fifteen minutes—"

Denny only asked him one more question. "Who was the guy with the white scar?"

"What guy with what white scar? I didn't see no guy with a scar. He musta come in after I left."

Denny took his hand off Joe's shoulder for the first time. He tapped his notebook meaningfully. "You may be telling the truth and you may not. You better pray you were. I know where you work and I've got your home address, and if you've been stringing me, I'll know where to find you. Now get back in there and keep your mouth shut!"

He turned and slunk into the building, looking back mesmerized over his shoulder at Denny the whole way.

Exit Joe.

We got in a cab. Denny said, "I think he's telling the truth, as far as you can be sure about those things. If he isn't, I can always pick him up fast enough. If I did now, I'd have to book him, and that would bring the whole thing out down at Headquarters."

"How'd—how'd the knife come out?" I asked apprehensively.

"Not good for you," he let me know grimly. "Your mitts are all over it. And there's not a sign of anyone else on it. It must have been cleaned off good before it was handed to you. It's going to crack down on the back of your neck like a crowbar when I've finally got to turn it in."

The cab stopped and we were around the corner from the party flat. We got out and headed straight for the entrance, without any preliminary casing or inquiring around. We had to. It was 4:30 by now, and the deadline was still on us—only it was shortening all the time. It was a kind of flashy-looking place, the kind that people who lived by horse betting would pick to live in.

I couldn't help shuddering as we went in the entrance. We were now only two steps away from murder. There remained the man with the scar and the room with the musical walls. Getting closer all the time.

We didn't have any trouble getting in. They seemed to expect anyone at any time of the day, and made no bones about opening up. An overripe blonde in a fluffy negligee, eyes still slitted from sleep and last night's rouge still on her face, was waiting for us at the door when we got out of the self-service car. She was shoddy and cheap, yes, but there was something good-natured and likeable about her, even at first sight.

"I never know who to expect any more." she greeted us cheerfully. "Somebody parked their gum on the announcer a few weeks ago, and you can't hear anything through it ever since. So I just take potluck —"

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Denny flashed her the badge. She showed a peculiar sort of dismay at the sight of it. It was dismay all right, but a resigned, fatalistic kind. She let her hands hang limply down like empty gloves. "Oh, I *knew* something like this was going to happen sooner or later!" she lamented. "I been telling Ed over and over we gotta cut out giving those parties and letting just anyone at all in. I already lost a valuable fur piece that way last year—"

"Okay if we come in and talk to you?" He had to ask that, I guess, because he had no search warrant.

She stood back readily enough to let us through. The place was a wreck—they hadn't gotten around to cleaning it up yet after the night before. "Is it pretty serious?" she asked nervously. "Who told you about us?"

Denny was trying to trap her, I could see. "Your friend with the scar on his jaw—know who I mean?"

She didn't know, and she seemed on the level about it—as on the level as Joe Fraser had been about not knowing there was dope peddled up here. "I can't place anyone with a scar on his jaw—" She poised a finger at the corner of her mouth and looked around at various angles in search of inspiration.

"Are you denying there was a guy with a scar on his jaw up here last night?" Denny said truculently. He had my word for that, and I was sure of that part of it, if nothing else.

"No, there could have been ten guys with scars. All I'm saying is if there was I didn't see him. The excitement was a little too much for me, and I retired about midnight." She meant she'd passed out, I guess. "He may have come in after that. You'd better ask my husband."

She went through the next room and spoke into the one beyond. He was asleep, I guess, and she had to talk loud. "Ed, we're in trouble. You better come out here and answer this man's questions."

Ed came out after her looking like a scarecrow in a dressing gown. Interest in the races had kept him thin around the middle, if it hadn't prevented his hair from falling out. Denny woke him up with the same question he'd just given her.

"No, I didn't notice anyone with a scar here last night. He might have been here and just happened to have that side of his face turned away from me each time I got a look at him. But even so, he wasn't anyone I know personally. I don't know anyone with a scar."

"Some guy got in here, and you not only didn't know him but didn't even *see* him the whole time he was in your place. What kind of people are you anyway?"

"Well, that's the way we live, mister. We may be careless but we have a helluva good time."

Denny scanned him for several uncomfortable minutes. Suddenly

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he said, "Mind if I look around?"

"N-no, go ahead." They were both frightened, but in the vague way of people who don't know what to expect next.

I didn't get what Denny was after for a minute. I trailed after him, and they trailed after me. In each room he went into, he only had eyes for the closet—when there was one. Or rather, the keyhole in the closet.

There was only one that didn't have a key sticking out of it.

We got to it finally. It was painted white. It was in a little room at the back, a sort of spare room. My heart started to pick up speed.

It seemed to stand out from the walls, as if it was coated with luminous paint. My eyes almost seemed to be able to pierce it, as though they were X-rays, and make out, huddled on the inside—I looked around in cold, sick fear in the split second that we all stood there grouped in the doorway.

That mission-type table over there, didn't it look like the very one I had up-ended against the locked closet? That window, with the dark shade drawn all the way down to the bottom— "No, you can't get out that way, that's a dead window, blocked with bricks." I didn't have the nerve to step over to it and raise the shade.

Denny had tightened up too, I could see. He didn't take out the key I'd found on my bureau. Instead he said, "D'you mind unlocking that?"

Right away they both got flustered. They looked at each other helplessly. She said to him, "Where'd we put it *this* time?"

He said, "I dunno, you were the one put it away. I *told* you to pick the same place each time. You keep changing the place, and then we can't find it ourselves!"

They both started looking high and low. She explained to Denny, "We call that closet The Safe. When we feel one of those parties coming on, we gather up everything valuable and shove it all in there, and lock it up till it's over."

Denny didn't look convinced or relenting. I was leaning against the door frame—I needed support.

"It's all our own stuff," she said.

He gave her the stony eye.

The harder they looked, the more flustered they got. I kept wondering why he didn't take out the key and try to fit it in. Why did he have to torture me this way? My chest was pounding like a dynamo.

Was he in there, whoever he was? Would he topple out on us when it was opened finally? But if they'd known about it, they would have smuggled him out long ago, wouldn't they? Or else beat it away from here themselves. Or suppose they hadn't known about it themselves and still didn't? That wouldn't make me any the less guilty.

The Sorrell woman suddenly gave a yelp of triumph, from the direction of the bedroom, where the ever-widening search had led her.

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She came running in with it, holding it up between her fingers. You could hardly distinguish what it was—it was all clotted with some white substance. "I hid it in my cold cream tin, I remember now!" she exulted. "Luckily I stopped a minute to rub a little on—"

Denny wouldn't let her get over to the keyhole with it; he took the key, inserted it himself, gave it a twist, and the door swung out. Furs, silverware, luggage—everything that predatory guests might have made off with was piled up inside.

But no dead bodies.

I had to sit down for a minute; I felt weak all over.

"It's all our own stuff," the woman said for the third or fourth time. "Did somebody tell you we had something in there didn't belong to us?"

"No, just an idea of mine," Denny said quietly. He handed the key back and turned away.

It was dusk when we left the Sorrell apartment. All day someone had lain murdered in a closet, and we were no nearer to knowing where. And now it was night again, the second night since it had happened.

We stood down there on the street outside the place. Because we didn't know where to go now. There was a gap. The first step had led into the second, but the second had led into a vacuum.

"Well, my way didn't pay off," he said glumly. "The thing's broken in two." He turned and looked up at the lighted windows behind us. "And I'm inclined to give the Sorrells the benefit of the doubt. I don't think they really know this man with the scar. I don't think they really noticed him in their place last night. I don't think they realized anyone had cocaine on him and passed some to you. I *have* to give them the benefit of the doubt—for the present. I can't go after it the way I would ordinarily—have them watched, check their movements, track down as many people as I can who were at the party, in hopes of finally getting a line on him. We haven't got time. We'll have to jump the gap blindfolded and try for the third foothold—the room with the singing walls."

We passed a cigar store and Denny went in, stepped inside the phone booth. I figured it was to Headquarters, without his telling me so. It was. He came back and said, "Well, our margin of safety still holds—they haven't found him yet. I checked on all reported homicides, and there's no one been turned up stabbed in a closet—as of 6:45 this evening." He gave me a look. "But that don't mean there's no one in a closet still waiting to be turned up. We've got to hustle."

Sure we did—but where?

"Can you remember leaving here at all?"

"No, there's a complete blank. The next I knew was the room with

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the singing walls. Scarface reappeared in that sequence, so I must have left with him; he must have taken me there from here."

"Obviously. But that don't tell us where it is."

It was strangely topsy-turvy, this thing. Ordinarily they get the murdered remains first, have to go out and look for the murderer. In this case, he had the murderer at hand from the beginning, and couldn't find out where the remains were. Even the murderer couldn't help him.

"About those so-called singing walls. Was it a radio or television you heard through them? That's the first thing occurs to me, of course."

"No, I'm pretty sure it wasn't. There wasn't a scrap of human voice, or of station announcement in between. If I was able to distinguish the tunes clearly enough to recognize them, I would have been able to hear the announcer too, wouldn't I? And there's at least a title given between numbers on any radio or television program."

"You can't remember how you got there? Not even the vaguest recollection? Whether it was on foot, or in a cab, or in a car with him, or by bus?"

"No. Any more than I can remember how I got away afterw—Wait!" I broke off suddenly.

"What is it?" he pounced.

"I just remembered a little detail I didn't tell you before. I wonder if it's any good to you or not."

"I told you I never throw anything away. Let me have it."

"I either spent or lost ten cents sometime during the course of the night. When I met Fraser on the street, I had thirty-five cents in my pocket. I can remember standing there jingling it just before he came up to me. This morning there was only twenty-five cents on my bureau. I was out a dime. D'you think I spent it making my way home—from wherever this was?"

He liked that right away, I could see; he liked that a lot. "It could be a yardstick, to measure just how far out this place was, if nothing else. It don't give us the direction, but it might give us the approximate distance. Can you remember making your way back at all?"

"Yeah, partly; only the opening stages, though. I remember slinking along, hugging walls and doorways, scared stiff. I don't remember what part of town I was in, though. And then the curtain came down again, and I don't remember how I finally got back."

"What kind of coins was this thirty-five cents in, when you had it last night—can you remember that?"

"Easily, I counted it over enough times. Three nickles and two dimes. And this morning there were only the three nickles and a dime left."

"That's important," he said. "That fact that the three nickles were car-

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ried over eliminates the possibility that you paid a fifteen-cent fare. If you paid any fare at all, you paid an exact ten cents. It's still possible you lost the dime, of course, but we can't let that stop us. If you spent a dime fare, that eliminates taxis. Now the bus system here runs on a mileage basis, you know that. Ten cents for a certain distance, then fifteen, and so on. This missing dime seems to show you boarded an inbound bus at some point within the ten-cent zone and rode in toward our place.

"D'you see what I'm driving at? We're looking for some place in that ten-cent bus zone where there's music playing late at night, until two or three in the morning. And not a radio or television—either a real band or a phonograph that changes its own records by automatic control. Some roadhouse or resort or even just a hole-in-the-wall taproom. And then we're looking for a room right upstairs over it, or right next door to it, with a partition wall so thin it lets this music come whispering through. There's our problem."

"But it seemed to me I did a lot of this running away on foot first; my starting point might have been quite a distance off from this ten-cent bus zone."

"It seemed that way. I doubt you did in your condition. Narcotics distort your time sense, for one thing. Just down the block and around a couple of corners, to you might have seemed like an endless flight that went on for hours. Then again, of course, you may be right about it; I wasn't on your feet. The only way we'll find out is to put it to the proof."

There were two bus lines that passed the immediate neighborhood our own flat was in, the Fairview line and one that went out to the municipal beach at Duck Island. The routes were parallel this far in; they only diverged farther out. The double route was two blocks over from our place.

"We'll take whichever one comes along first," he said while we stood waiting.

A Fairview one hove into sight first, outward bound of course. We got on and he said, "Two ten-cent fares." Then he stood behind the driver's back and, company regulations to the contrary, asked, "How many stops do you make in the ten-cent zone?" They ran on fixed stops.

"Only three." He gave us the intersection names. "After that, it jumps to fifteen."

"Well, offhand, could you mention any inns or dance joints out that way, where the music plays late?"

"Try Dixie Trixie's, that's just out side the city limits—"

Denny cut him short. "No, I'm asking about the ten-cent zone, between Continental and Empire Road."

"Naw, I don't think you'll find

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many around there—one or two honkytonks maybe."

"We'll have to do our own scouting then," Denny said to me. He led the way back to a seat and swore bitterly under his breath, "We'll be at it all night."

We got out at Continental, the first ten-cent stop, and he did a little surveying before we moved off the bus route. The task before us wasn't as bad as it had threatened to be at first sight. It was no cinch by any means, but at least he was able to put physical limits to the terrain we had to finecomb.

The bus stops were eight blocks apart. A railroad embankment walled us off six blocks to the left, and a large park with a lake in it dead-ended the streets four blocks over the other way. He divided the difference between the two bus stops, multiplied it by ten crosswise blocks, and that gave us *forty square blocks* to canvass for each bus stop.

Naturally, it wasn't a question of going into every doorway of every building along those forty blocks—that would have still been pretty much of a physical impossibility. A cop on the beat here, a storekeeper there, was able to speed us through by listing the places in his immediate vicinity that provided music late at night. That way we sometimes only had to make one stop in five or six blocks. We investigated several bars which had coin phonographs, but none had all four of the selections that I'd remembered hearing in their repertoire.

We went back and boarded the bus, rode one stop ahead, and started the whole thing over. Same lack of results. The closest we got to anything in this sector was when the harness cop told us there had been a lot of complaints about a Polish family playing their phonograph late at nights with all the stops out. But they didn't own any of the records we were looking for.

We went back, caught another bus, got out at the third and last ten-cent stop, and finished the chore out. That fizzled too. We limped aboard an in-bound bus and rode back to where the Duck Island line diverged from this one. The thought of going through the same routine all over again, on a new bus route, was more than we could face without a breathing spell.

We dragged ourselves into the nearest resting place we could find, which happened to be a diner, and just sat there slumped over the counter, too tired even to hold our backs up straight, chins nearly dunked in our coffee cups, talking it over in low voices so the counterman wouldn't overhear us.

"Even if I wanted to take you down with me and report it—and I don't, God knows—I couldn't until we've found out where it happened. They'd have to have that. And the longer it takes and the colder it gets, the harder it's going to be to clear you." He looked down at the wax-

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white, trembling hand I'd suddenly braked on his arm. "What is it?"

"Did you hear that, just then?"

He turned and looked over at the wire-mesh loudspeaker set on a low shelf near the coffee boiler.

"They just got through playing *Alice Blue Gown* and now—"

He didn't get me for a minute. "But this diner's in the middle of a vacant plot, you saw that when we came in. There aren't any adjoining—"

"No, no, you haven't been paying attention to the program, I have. They got through *Blue Gown* a minute or two ago; now they've gone into *Out on a Limb*. Listen, hear it? That's the same order I heard them in last night—*there.*"

"That's just a coincidence. There must be a thousand bands all over the country playing those two pieces day and night—"

"The third one'll tell. The third one was *Oh, Johnny.*" I could hardly wait for it to end; it never seemed to, it seemed to go on forever. I balled a fist and beat it into the hollow of my hand to hurry it up. He sat there straining his ears too; his back was held a little straighter now.

It wound up finally and there was a short pause. Then the tune itself. I grabbed him with both hands this time, nearly toppled him off the tall stool he was perched on. *"Oh, Johnny!* That's not a coincidence any more. That's the same sequence I heard them in last night. That's the same band."

"But I thought you said it wasn't a broadcast, that you heard no station announcements. This is."

"But there are no station announcements on this either—it's evidently a program that only makes one every five or six numbers. I still don't think it was a broadcast; this isn't the same hour I heard them, and they wouldn't broadcast twice in one night. But I think it was the same band, I'm sure of it. Maybe they broadcast first, and then play in person somewhere later on —"

The *Woodpecker Song* had started in. I turned around to tell him that, not sure if he knew tunes by ear as well as I did. But he'd had enough; the stool next to me was empty and he was already over at the pay phone on the wall. His coin chimed in along with the opening notes.

"What station you tuned at?" he called out. The counterman read the dial, gave him some hick station I'd never heard of before. He got its studio number from Information.

"Who's that you got going out over the air now?" Then, "Bobby Leonard's Band? Find out where they work about one to three or four every night. Hurry it up, it's important. No, I can't wait until they're through broadcasting, this is police business. Write the question on a slip of paper and hand it in right where they are now."

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He had to wait until the answer was relayed back, evidently scribbled on the same piece of paper.

"The Silver Slipper, eh, out on Brandon Drive." He hung up, bounced a coin on the counter, and ran out. We'd both stopped being tired, like magic.

"It's all the way over on the other side of town," he said to me in the cab. "God only knows how you found your way back to our place. It shows you what a wonderful thing the subconscious is, even under the influence of a drug."

We got to it in about twenty minutes, paid off the cab, and stood there sizing it up. It was mostly glass, you could look in on three sides; it had a glass roof that could be pushed back in fine weather so they could dance under the open sky. The fourth wall was solid masoney. Only a scattered couple or two were dancing. They evidently used a radio to provide the incidental music, until this Leonard and his band came over and did a lick later on.

He snapped his head around to me. "Familiar?"

I shook mine. "Not a flicker of it comes back to me."

On the fourth side it backed against two buildings, which in turn were set back to back, each one facing a different street. We cased them both, from their respective corners. One was a trim two-story cement garage, that looked as if it had only recently been put up. The other was a sort of rundown lodginghouse, with a milky lighted globe shining down over its doorway. It was the obvious choice of the two; garages don't have closets. Nor furniture to pile up in front of them either.

We went in.

It couldn't have been dignified by the name hotel. The "desk" was just a hinged flap across an alcove, within which sat a man in shirtsleeves reading a paper under a light.

One good thing, there was no question of a bell boy showing you up and looking on. You paid your fifty cents, you got a key, and you found your own way up. We didn't want any witnesses—if it was in here.

He didn't even bother looking up at us, just heard the double tread come in and asked: "Two-in-one or two singles?"

Denny said, "How many rooms you got here that back up against that place next door? We like to fall asleep to music."

Even that didn't get a rise out of him; he expected anything and everything. "One on a floor, three floors, that makes three altogether. I've got someone in the one on the second, though."

So that was the one. My stomach gave a sort of half turn to the right, and then back again.

Denny said, "D'you have to sign when you get in here?"

"You got to put down something

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when you pick up your key, you can't just walk in." Meaning a place like this didn't expect right names and didn't care if it got them.

"Let's see what was signed for that one you got taken on the second."

"What's all this to you?" But he was still too indifferent to be properly resentful about it.

"We might know the guy."

We did. One of them anyway. It was a double entry. The cocaine had vibrated my handwriting like an earthquake but I could still recognize it. *Tom Cochrane, 2228 Foster Street.* For once they'd gotten a right name and a right address. It was probably the only one in the whole ledger—and it had signed for murder!

The second name, also in my handwriting, was *Ben Doyle.* No address given, just a wavy line. So I'd signed in for someone else too.

We just looked at each other. Then at him. Or rather, Denny did. I was afraid to.

"Were you here when this was signed?"

This time he did get annoyed, because the question touched him personally. "Naw, I go off at twelve, don'tcha think I gotta sleep sometime too?" That explained, at least, why he didn't recognize me. But not why it hadn't been found out yet.

"D'you give any kind of service here? Don't you send someone in to clean these rooms in the daytime?"

He got more annoyed. "What d'ya think this is, the Ritz? When a room's vacated, the handyman goes in and straightens up the bed. Until it is we leave it alone, for as long as it's been paid for." I must have paid for this one for two days in advance, double occupancy—there was the entry "$2," after the two names. But I hadn't had two dollars on me; I'd only had thirty-five cents.

"What's all this talk about? Do you two guys want a room or don't you?" We did, but we wanted that second-floor room that already had "someone" in it. Denny obviously didn't want to use his badge to force him to open it up for us—that would have meant a witness to the revelation that was bound to follow immediately afterward, and automatic police notification before he had a chance to do anything for me—if there was anything he *could* do.

"Give us the third-floor one," he said, and put down a dollar bill. The man hitched down a key with a ponderous enamel tag from the rows where they hung. The one immediately below was missing. The "occupant" still had it. If I'd taken it away with me, I must have lost it in the course of that mad flight through the shadows; only the closet key had turned up at our place this morning.

Denny, with unconscious humor,

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scrawled "Smith Bros." in the registry (he told me later he wasn't trying to be funny), and we started up the narrow squeaky staircase. He turned aside when we got to the second floor, motioned me to keep on climbing. "Scuffle your feet to cover me, I'm going to try to force the other door open."

I shuffled my way up step by step, trying to sound like the two of us, while I heard him faintly tinkering at the lock with some implement. I unlocked the one we'd hired on the floor above, put on the light, looked in. Yes, there was something vaguely familiar about it; this was the end of the trail, all right. The closet in this one had a key in it, and had been left slightly ajar by the last occupant.

I crept back to the stairs and listened. The tinkering had stopped, so he must have forced the door. A curt "Sst!" sounded, meant for me. I eased down one flight.

The light from inside was shining out across the grubby passage. A half section of his face showed past the door frame, waiting for me; then it withdrew. I made my way inside, moving slow, breathing fast.

It was the right room.

He'd already taken down the stuff I'd barricaded the closet door with—a table, a chair, even a mattress.

He signed to me and I closed the door behind me. He gave the closet key I'd turned over to him a fatalistic flip-up in the hollow of his hand.

"Here goes," he said. I got a grip on the back of a chair and hung on tight.

He fitted it into the lock. It went in like silk and turned the lock without a hitch. It couldn't have worked easier. It belonged here. I said a fast prayer—that was all there was time for. "Make it turn out it was somebody else who did it!"

Denny's body gave a hitch and there was no more time for praying. He'd caught it against him as it swayed out with the closet door.

It must have been semi-upright behind it the whole time. I hadn't done a good job propping—it must have shifted over against the door instead of staying against the wall behind; and the way the knees were buckled kept it from toppling over sideways.

He let it down to the floor. It stayed in a cockeyed position from the way it had been jammed in. It was stiff as tree-bark. He turned it over on its back, made me come over.

"Remember him? Take a good look now. Remember him?"

"Yeah," I said, dry-lipped.

"Remember him *alive,* that's what I mean."

"No, no, I only remember him lying there, only not so shriveled—" I backed away, nearly fell over a chair.

"Pull yourself together, kid," he

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said. "This is something they would have put you through anyway. It's a lot easier just with me in the room with you."

He disarranged the clothing, peered down. "Sure, a knife did it," he nodded. "Three bad gashes—one in the stomach, one between the ribs, and one that looks like it must have grazed the heart."

He looked at the belt buckle. "B. D.," he murmured. "What was that name down there—Ben Doyle?"

He started going through pockets. "No, he's been cleaned out; but the name checks with those initials, all right."

He drew back a little. I saw him scanning the corpse's upturned soles. "He did a lot of walking, didn't he?" The bottom layer of each was worn through in a round spot the size of a silver dollar. "But the heels are new, not worn down at all. What'd he do, walk around on tiptoes?"

He took something from his pocket and started to reverse a small screw that protruded like a nailhead. Then he pulled and the whole heel came off. It was hollow. Three or four folded paper packets lay inside.

He opened one into the shape of a little paper boat. I didn't have to be told. I'd seen that white stuff before.

"He was a peddler," he said. "But he wasn't the guy that contacted you at the party. Where does he come in it? I wonder if the Narcotic Squad have heard of this guy before, can give me anything on him. I'm going to check with headquarters."

Before he went out, he crossed to the window and raised the dark shade that shrouded it. The pane behind it was also painted dark, a dark green. You could see the heads of heavy six-inch nails studded all along the frame, riveting it down. Even so, he took that same screwdriver from his pocket and scraped away a tiny gash on the dried-paint surface. Then he held a lighted match close up to it.

"Solid brick backed up to it," he commented. He started for the door. "You're down on their blotter for this room—and in your own handwriting—along with this dead guy. I want to find out if he was seen coming here with you. Or if it was the guy with the scar. Or both. Or neither. I gotta dig up that other slouch that was in charge of the key rack here from midnight to morning—he's the only one can answer all those things."

I started out after him. I couldn't help it. I couldn't have stayed in there alone for a million dollars.

"All right, go back and wait in the one over this, if it gets you," he consented. He closed the door on the grisly sight. "But keep your eyes and ears open; make sure no one gets in here until we're ready to break it ourselves." He went down and I went up.

I didn't know how long to give

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him, but pretty soon it seemed to be taking longer than it should have. Pretty soon the room up here started to get me, just as bad as though I'd stayed down there. Try hanging around when you know there's a dead body under your feet in the room below, a body you're to blame for, and you'll know what I mean.

The band showed up for work next door while I was in there, and instead of making it better, that only made it worse. It nearly drove me nuts, that whispered music coming through the walls; it brought last night back too vividly again.

Finally I couldn't stand it in there another minute, I had to get out, wait for him down below by the street entrance. I almost lunged for the door, a cold panic on me. I got it open, poked the bilious light out.

Then I saw something in the darkness behind me. Something that made me hold the door at half-closing point and stand there on the threshold.

It should have been pitch-black behind me in there now. The place only had a dead window. It wasn't. A late moon must have come up since we'd been in here. Three phantom silvery lines stood out around the drawn shade, like a faint tracing of phosphorus. There was moonlight backing it, only visible now that the room light was out.

My panic evaporated. I went back in again, leaving it dark. I crossed to the shade, shot it up. Moonlight flashed at me through the dust-filmed glass. There was no brick-work, no dark paint, blanking out the windows on this floor. Denny hadn't been up here at all, or we might have found that out sooner. The garage was only two stories high, the rooming house three—that was a detail that had escaped our attention until now.

The frame wasn't nailed. I lifted it and it went up. The garage roof was a bare four feet below me, plenty accessible enough to— But the fact remained the body hadn't been in this room, but in the one below, where the window *was* blocked.

I scanned the roof; it looked like an expanse of gray sand under me. In the middle of it, though, there was dim light peering up through some sort of skylight or ventilator.

I didn't have any theory; I didn't know what I thought I'd find out or what I hoped I'd find out. I just went ahead on instinct alone. I sidled across the sill and planted my legs on the graveled roof. I started to pick my way carefully over toward that skylight, trying not to sound the gravel.

I got to the perimeter of it, crouched down on hands and knees, peered over the edge and down. Nothing. Just the cement garage floor two stories below, and a mechanic in greasy overalls down there wiping off a car with a handful of waste. No way to get up, no

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way to get down—except head-first.

I straightened up, skirted it, eased on. I took a look down over the front edge of the roof. Just the unbroken cement front of the garage; a fly couldn't have managed it. I went around to the side, the one way from the Silver Slipper. There was a narrow chasm there, left between the garage and some taller warehouse next door. And midway down that there *was* something—a pale, watery, yellow reflection cast on the warehouse wall by some opening in the garage wall directly under me, at second-floor level. And more to the point still, a sort of rickety iron Jacob's ladder leading down to it. I could only see this at its starting point, up where I was; the darkness swallowed the rest of it.

I swung out on it, tested it with one foot. Narrow rungs. It seemed firm enough. I started down very slow. It was like going down into a bottle of ink. The reflection of the lighted square came up and bathed my feet. The ladder didn't go any lower, it ended in a level "stage" of iron slats, no wider than the window.

I tucked my feet in under the last downward rung so they wouldn't show in the light, leaned out above them, gripping a rung higher up backhand. It was a grotesque position. I slanted my head forward and peered into the lighted square.

It was an office connected with the garage. There were filing cabinets against the wall, a large flat-topped desk with a cone light over it. There was a man sitting there at it, talking to two others. Or rather going over some accounts with them. He was checking some sort of list on a sheet of paper he held.

There was money on the desk, lots of it—more money than any garage like this would take in in a month. It was separated into several stacks. As he finished checking one list, he'd riff through one stack, rapidly and deftly thumb-counting it, then snap an elastic around it, and move it over to the other. Then he'd begin on a second list.

There was something vaguely familiar about the shape of his head, even seen from the back, and the cut of his shoulders. The other two I'd never seen before, I was sure of that. One was sitting negligently on an outside corner of the desk, the other standing up against it, hands deep in his pockets. They looked too well dressed to be hanging around the upstairs room of a garage.

I must have taken too much time to size them up. After all, a paring of a face is just as conspicuous against a black-out window as a full face would be. I didn't even see the signal passed, nor which of the two gave it. Suddenly the checkmaster had twirled around on his swivel chair and was staring out at me eye to eye.

That white scar along the under-

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side of his jaw stood out as visibly as a strip of court plaster. So there he was at last, the diabolus ex machina.

My position on the ladder was too complicated to make for a streamlined getaway, I had too many things to do simultaneously. I had to extricate my tucked-in feet, make a complete body turn to face the ladder, before I could start up. Even then, I missed a rung in my hurry, jolted down half a foot, and hit my chin on one of the upper ones. By that time the window had flashed up and a powerful grip had me around the ankle.

I was torn off the ladder, dragged in feet first, and the only thing that saved my skull from cracking in the bounce from window sill to floor was that it bedded against one of their bodies. I lay flat for a minute and their three faces glowered down at me. One of them backed a foot and found my ribs. The pain seemed to shoot all the way through to the other side.

Then I was dragged up again and stood on my own feet. One of them had a gun bared, brief as the onslaught had been.

The man with the scarred jaw rasped, "He's the patsy I used last night I toldje about!"

"There goes your whole set-up, Graz!" the third one spat disgustedly.

The man with the scar they called Graz looked at me vengefully. His whole face was so livid with rage it now matched the weal. "What the hell, it still holds good! He was one of Doyle's customers, Doyle cut off his supply, so he knifed him!"

"Yeah, but he ain't up there in the room with him any more."

"All right, he come to, lammed out through a third-floor window —like he did. He'll be found dead by his own hand in Woodside Park, when morning comes. What's the difference? It changes it a little, but not much. It's still him all the way through. Him and Doyle took the room together to make a deal. He was seen going in where Doyle'll be found. And you know how snowbirds act when they've got the crave on and are cut off. There's a lake there in Woodside. We're gonna dunk his head in it and hold it there until his troubles are over. Then throw the rest of him in. How they gonna tell the difference afterwards?"

"Suppose Doyle had already sang a note or two to the police, mentioning names, before you—"

"He didn't sing nothing, I stopped him before he had a chance to—the minute I seen that narcotics dick beginning to cultivate him, I cut out his tonsils! An operation like that in time saves nine. Come on, let's get started." He gathered up the money and lists from the desk. "And another thing," he added, "we're giving this joint up, it's no good to us any more. We're coming back as soon as we ditch

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this punk and move out all them filing cabinets, right tonight!"

His two subordinates wedged me up between them. He put out the light behind us, and the four of us started down a cement inner stair to the main floor of the garage. "Run out the big black one, Joe," one of them said to the grease monkey I'd seen through the skylight, "we're going out for a little air."

He brought out a big sedan, climbed down, and turned it over to them. He must have been one of them, used for a front on the main floor; they didn't try to conceal my captivity from him.

They shoved me into it. It was like getting into a hearse. That's what it was intended for, only it was taking me to the cemetery before death instead of after. I didn't say a word. "Denny'll come back to that room too late. He won't know what happened to me; he'll start looking for me all over town, and I'll be lying at the bottom of the lake—"

Graz and one of his two underlings got in with me and the other one took the wheel. We glided down the cement ramp toward the open street beyond. Just as our fenders cleared the garage entrance, a taxi came to a dead stop at the curb directly before us, effectively walling us in. The way it had crept forward it seemed to have come from only a few yards away, as though it had been poised waiting there. I saw the driver jump down on the outside and run for his life, across the street and around the corner. The sedan's furious horn-tattoo failed to halt his flight.

The big car they had me in was awkwardly stuck there, on the slant, just short of the entrance. It couldn't go forward on account of the abandoned cab, it couldn't detour around it on account of its own length of chassis, and the mechanic had sent down a sort of fireproof inner portcullis behind us, without waiting, keeping us from backing up.

They weren't given much time for the implications of the predicament to dawn on them. Denny suddenly straightened up just outside the rear window on one side and balanced a gun over its rim. The precinct harness cop did the same on the opposite side. They had them between a threat of crossfire.

Denny said, "Touch the ceiling and swing out, one on each side."

But he and the cop couldn't control the man at the wheel—he was a little too far forward and they were wedged in too close. I saw his shoulder give a slight warning dip against the dashboard as he reached for something. I buckled one leg, knee to chin, and shot the flat of my shoe square against the back of his head. His face slammed down into the wheel. He didn't want to reach for any more guns after that.

It took a little while to marshal them back upstairs, and send in word to Headquarters, and clean

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out the files and all the other evidence around the garage. They found traces of blood on the cement inner stairs, showing where Doyle had been knifed as he was trying to escape from the death interview with Scarjaw, kingpin of the dope ring.

Denny said to me while we were waiting: "A guy on the Narcotics Squad recognized this Doyle right away, even from the little I was able to give them over the phone. They'd picked him up several times already, and they were trying to dicker with him to get the names of the higher-ups he worked for. When I got back to the room, that open window on the third tipped me off which way you'd gone.

"From what Officer Kelly here had just finished telling me a little while before, I figured there was something fishy about this garage. He'd seen people drive up at certain hours to try to have their cars serviced, and they'd be turned away. And yet it was never particularly full of cars. I figured the smart thing to do was arrange a little reception committee at the street entrance, where they weren't expecting it."

The final word, however, wasn't said until several hours later. He came out of the back room at Headquarters, near daylight, came over to where I'd been waiting. "You didn't do it, Tom. It's official now, if that'll make you feel any better. We've been questioning them in relays ever since we brought them in, and we just finished getting it all down."

He waved a set of typed sheets at me. "Here's how it goes. Graz and his two lieutenants killed Doyle in the garage about midnight last night just around the time you were arriving at the Sorrells' party with Fraser. That rooming house had already come in handy to them once or twice—it's got a vicious name on the police records—so they used it again, for a sort of dumping ground.

"Graz sent one of his stooges around and had him take a room on the third floor, within easy access of the garage roof. That was just to obtain a convenient back way in. They smuggled the body across the roof and passed it in to the stooge through the window. But this stooge wasn't supposed to take a murder rap, he was just acting as middleman. Graz himself went out looking for the real stooge, the stooge for murder—and that turned out to be you.

"Graz had been to those dizzy parties of the Sorrells before, so he knew all about them. He went there last night, picked you out, got you higher than a kite, brought you over to the rooming house in his car. He saw to it you were given a room on the second floor, directly under the one where the body lay waiting for transfer. Not only that, he had you sign for it for yourself *and for Doyle,* who was already dead.

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Doyle was supposed to be along in a minute or two.

"He got rid of the fellow in charge of the keys by sending him next door to the Silver Slipper for some coffee to 'sober' you up. By the time he got back with it, Doyle was already supposed to have shown up. The original stooge on the third floor spoke loudly to you to show there was somebody up there in the room with you. Graz said; 'His friend's up there with him now; he'll be all right, so I'll shove off.'

"Doyle *had* shown up, but in a different way. They'd carried him down the stairs from the third-floor room to your room with the bricked-up window. They wiped off the knife handle and planted it on you; they smeared your shirt front with Doyle's blood. You were dazed, in no condition to notice anything that went on around you. Graz was careful to carry the coffee up only to the door, pass it in to you, come right down again, and leave. Doyle's 'voice' still sounded up there with you in the room, for the fellow at the key rack to hear.

"You were given another whiff of coke to hold you steady for a while. Then the original stooge came down, presumably from the third floor, handed in his key, and checked out.

"You were left there drugged, with a murdered man in your room, his blood on your shirt, the knife that had been used concealed on your person in newspaper. You even helped the scheme out up to a point; you got the horrors, hid the body in the closet, locked it, and piled everything movable you could lay your hands on up against the door. Then you fled for your life.

"You got a small break, that wouldn't have helped out in the end. The guy at the key rack must have been either dozing or out of his alcove again. I spoke to him just now, and he never saw you leave. That postponed discovery, but wouldn't have altered anything.

"As I said, the subconscious is a great thing. In all your terror, and stupefied as you were, you somehow found your way back to where you lived. You didn't wake up in the same room with the dead man, the way they were counting on your doing, and raise an outcry, and thereby sew yourself up fast then and there. You had a chance to talk it over with me first; we had a chance to put our heads together, without you being in the middle of it."

It was getting light when we got back to our own place. The last thing I said to him, outside the door, was: "Tell the truth, Denny, up to the time it broke, did you really figure I did it?"

His answer surprised me more than anything else about the whole thing. "Hell, yes!" he said. "I would have eaten my hat that you did!"

"I did too," I had to admit. "In fact, I was sure of it!"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 289th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . and like so many stories that appear in EQMM, this one has an interesting background . . .

Mrs. Armstrong's "first story" was sent to us by an old and valued friend, Dorothy Gardiner, author of WHAT CRIME IS IT?, THE SEVENTH MOURNER, LION IN WAIT, *and one of the towers of strength and common sense during the formative years of MWA (Mystery Writers of America). In her accompanying letter Dorothy Gardiner told us how she discovered one day that she needed a change in her daily living, a lift in her morale. Before she fully realized what she had done about it, she found herself involved (that's the only word for it) in a truly wonderful project. To her surprise, and to the surprise of all others concerned, she became a volunteer worker in the Presbyterian Senior Services.*

The PSS has a Center on Madison Avenue in New York City. Its program and objectives are to help elderly people, of both sexes and all religions and races—"senior citizens" whose lives have fallen apart and who are having difficulties adjusting to changed and still-changing conditions: women whose husbands have died and whose children are married and living their own complicated lives; men who have retired and are totally unprepared for leisure, suddenly having nothing to do with their time.

The PSS Center has as Director a young, energetic, and understanding clergyman, the Reverend Robert Armstrong, and under his general supervision the Center embraces all kinds of stimulating and therapeutic endeavors: classes, for example, in painting and piano playing for men and women who haven't picked up a brush or sat down at a piano in 50 years, or who haven't played the piano or painted all their lives.

Well, Dorothy Gardiner, that good and generous soul, undertook to teach a class in Creative Writing. She has nearly a dozen pupils—"Old Gals" mostly, a charming group, the oldest 81 and definitely "the belle of the ball." Her youngest pupil is the wife of the Director; she has always wanted to write, but with two children, a busy husband, and a four-room apartment to take care of without outside

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help—well, there haven't been too many spare hours to devote to the luxury of writing.

Dorothy Gardiner ended her letter by saying that her new work-interest has proved "the best thing in the world for me, whatever it may be doing to my pupils." It is blessed to give; it is blessed to receive. . . .

Mrs. Armstrong's "first story" is written in a semidocumentary style that is particularly appropriate to the "case history" feeling of her subject matter—which is as it should be in this instance; even more important, the "case history" style projects a convincing authenticity: you believe, without question, that the author knows what she is writing about—knows the background, the procedures, and most promising in a new writer, the hearts and minds of her characters . . .

FINAL ENTRY

by PRISCILLA W. ARMSTRONG

IF THE NEWSPAPER HAD NOT CARried the picture of Angela Scarlatti, I probably would never have thought of her again. She would have stayed in the closed file of my mind, along with so many others. It is a strange thing, that one can feel so strongly for another human being, and yet forget her, often in a day or two, in the crowd of others.

But this time I heard the end of the story; in fact, it had several endings, and this is unusual, for those of us who worked in Intake seldom witnessed the endings of stories. Sometimes I felt as impersonal as a funnel, with my pen and my mimeographed interview form and the little scrap of paper clipped onto the case record: *Case Assigned.*

I first met Angela Scarlatti in the way I met hundreds of other women—in a tiny pale-green cubicle called an Interview Room. She was only one of several appointments that morning; fall was a busy time for us in Adoption Intake because there always seemed to be a big crop of babies in late summer. The magazines and television portray the process of adoption as a lovely thing, with babies and prospective parents carefully matched; there is generally a tender scene at the end when the kindly social worker hands the eager parents their lovely six-month-old child.

That is all well and good, but I am here to tell you that most adoptions do not happen that way at all. Generally, the mother of the child

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hands the baby over to the adoptive mother or to an intermediary as she leaves the hospital. The doctor or the lawyer has made all the arrangements, and various fees have been paid out by the adoptive parents, most of which are legal, some of which are not. Then the natural mother is brought by her attorney to sign the papers giving her consent for the adoption, and giving up forever any claim to her child.

In our County, the Court has made provisions for the investigation of each adoptive home before granting the interview, and our agency was the one assigned to this task, thus affording both adoptive parents and infants the maximum protection under the circumstances. It is not an ideal arrangement, of course, but it is better than the "black market" practices it was designed to control and eliminate, and we prided ourselves on doing the very best possible job on behalf of the future of each infant.

Those of us who interviewed the natural mothers never saw the infants, and the home investigators never met the natural mothers. Our job in Intake was to elicit as much objective information as possible before turning the case over to an investigator.

Angela Scarlatti gave me all the objective information we needed, and a good deal of subjective information as well. I was considered very good at getting the facts despite emotional scenes and tears, and Natural Mother Scarlatti was full of tears, and in the end refused to sign the consent for adoption. When she went to court to demand the return of her child from the prospective adoptive parents, their attorneys and Angela's parents accused me of having influenced her to keep her love child—which I righteously denied under oath, thereby committing perjury and concealing the fact that I had committed the cardinal sin of the social worker: I had got myself emotionally involved with a client.

I remember how little and scared Angela looked as she faced me across the table in that green room. The pale autumn sun washed the room and the girl with a milky light, softening the harshness of the surroundings and making her dark brown hair smoky-black. Her little sallow face was still blurred and indistinct with the softness of childhood, but her young figure already looked overripe, like a hothouse fruit forced too soon to maturity. I remember thinking that one day she would be a round fat dumpling of a woman, and I wondered what was in store for her: the rosy, cheerful life of an Italian wife with a houseful of children, or the blowsy, slatternly life of a semi-tramp, like the woman of Samaria at the well, who had "had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband."

According to the interview, Angela was 17, the youngest child in

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an old-style, patriarchal, Italian-American family. There were several brothers and sisters older than she, all of whom were married and busy producing grandchildren for their parents by the time Angela was graduated from high school. She was 16 then, and her family was duly impressed with her rapid journey through school, but distressed about her lack of boy friends.

Angela was a quiet, obedient daughter, and she told me that her many skills about the house had brought her offers of marriage from some of her father's unmarried friends. These she had consistently refused, although her parents would have liked to see her settled down and raising a family of her own, and an older man has a great deal to offer. "The money and home were tempting," she told me, "but I wanted to marry for love."

Then she met the young man who was to become the father of her child, and found love, but without marriage.

Angela never told her parents where she had met him—she felt they would disapprove, and she desperately wanted their approval of Rip Phillips. She met him the night she went to visit a little Pentecostal Church which had just opened in the neighborhood; the Scarlattis were Catholic, but Angela sometimes attended the churches of her friends, with a feeling of wonder and sympathy for them.

Rip played his guitar for the service that night, and the congregation sang the ancient hymn-tunes. He was tall and good-looking, lean and sandy-haired, and he walked like a king. Perhaps it was because he was so different from the men she knew in the neighborhood that Angela was so attracted to him. "We were like night and day," she said. "He was so fair and I am so dark."

Rip began to call for her, to go to movies, to go dancing, to attend the little church where he played his guitar. At last her parents invited him to a meal, and soon he was spending a good deal of time at the Scarlatti home. Mr. and Mrs. Scarlatti made an honest effort to like this lanky stranger, and Angela was the first to admit this. But Rip disliked Italian cooking, laughed at their melodious songs, and sang his own mountain tunes in a loud nasal voice.

He argued with Mr. Scarlatti, and his gallantry toward Mrs. Scarlatti was of a kind to which she was unaccustomed, and by which she was offended. Furthermore, he drank, and drank hard. He disliked their homemade Italian wine, and brought his own whiskey, proclaiming that his homemade whiskey, back home, was far superior to anything available here.

But it was Rip's lack of responsibility that finally convinced the

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Scarlattis that their daughter should have nothing further to do with him. He changed jobs often, almost as frequently as he changed his shirt, and he had no intention of settling down to a steady job and a home. He had a farm, he said, back home in the mountains. He only wanted to earn some cash money, buy a car, go home, and pay off his mortgage.

He never suggested that Angela share his life with him; but Mr. and Mrs. Scarlatti were afraid he would make the offer and that Angela would accept, and they forbade him their home.

Angela and Rip continued to meet, however, and Angela became proud and defiant in the face of her parents' disapproval, until they ordered her not to see him again. Then they met in secret—in little bars and taverns where they spent their time drinking and singing with the other patrons. Angela became silent and withdrawn, and gave up looking for a job.

When she knew she was pregnant, she asked Rip to marry her and take her with him to his farm. He refused. "I'm free, and I can't be tied down to no woman. I come and go as I please. I hunt, I fish, and I don't wear shoes. It's a good life for me, but it ain't no kind of a life for a woman. Womenfolks get dried up and die, like my mother did. You have that baby, and you keep him, and you raise him up. When he gets big enough, I will come and fetch him, and teach him to live free, too."

Angela was too proud to beg, but she began to cry, and Rip hated a woman's tears. But he tried to comfort her. "He said the oddest thing to me," she said. "He said, 'You find a nice Italian boy to marry—a cop, a good cop—and one day your good policeman husband will kill my young son and me.' That gave me cold chills," she went on, "and I asked him where he ever got such a notion. He told me it was from an old song, a real old one, but he wouldn't sing it for me, or tell me the words. He just laughed," —in a way she would never forget.

Rip went away, and Angela had to tell her parents about the baby.

Mr. Scarlatti beat her, of course —she had expected that—and her mother wept. Then they began to think of arrangements. She would, of course, give the child up for adoption. Angela wanted to keep the baby, but since she was legally a minor, her parents told her the choice was not hers to make.

Mrs. Scarlatti made all the arrangements with the doctor, and in time they were notified that adoptive parents had been found who were well-to-do, would pay all costs and fees, and maybe give a little extra to Mr. Scarlatti for Angela's "living expenses."

Angela's baby was born healthy and beautiful with sandy hair and black eyes, and Angela named him Matthew because it was not an Ital-

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ian name and because it meant "Gift of God." On the third day she handed him over to a veiled woman on a street near the hospital, then came home with her parents and attorney to sign her consent to the adoption.

When I first heard the story of "a veiled woman on a street" or the "strange woman in the front seat of the attorney's car," I was skeptical, but years of experience had taught me that this is frequently the way it is done, and I accepted without question Angela's account of handing over her son.

I went on with the interview. We covered all the usual questions: health of Natural Mother, health of Natural Father, physical characteristics of each, special talents, and so on. Then I asked, "Why did you decide to place the child in adoption?"

"It will be better for the child to have rich parents," said Angela.

I always challenged that kind of answer. The tears began again, and I pushed a box of tissues toward her and waited. Finally she said that she would really like to keep little Matthew, but that it would be hard for her and for her parents. When she called her baby by name, I knew that she needed him more than the adoptive parents did.

Then I asked the printed question, "Is it your own desire to sign consent for this adoption?" and explained that although she was legally a minor, the law required that the decision be her own—that no one could coerce her into signing if she did not really want to. She dried her tears then, and smiled for the first time, a beautiful smile; she lifted her small pointed chin and refused to sign.

In the waiting room her parents stormed and wept when I told them of Angela's decision, and they stormed and wept in the Supervisor's Office, and in the Director's Office, and in the lawyer's office, and later, in the courtroom and in the Judge's Chambers, but in the end Angela had her son and also a job as a night waitress, and a shabby room where the seedy old landlady would listen for the baby while Angela was at work.

We closed our file on the Phillips-Scarlatti case.

In time the boy grew old enough to attend a day nursery while Angela worked at a daytime job, and it was at the nursery school that I saw her again, for my own little son attended the same nursery. Angela was as pretty as before, but she had changed. She no longer had the soft, long-haired childish beauty of two years ago, nor had she become the fat dumpling I had predicted. Now she wore her dark hair pulled back severely, showing to advantage the lines of her small face, and the pale olive skin and great black eyes.

She was thin, too thin, I thought, but she had great chic, and I

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learned that she did some occasional modeling to supplement her income as a waitress. She was cool now—no flicker of emotion showed on her lovely face. She might have been carved of aged ivory.

Little Matthew was handsome and sturdy, and he too "walked like a king." Angela was obviously proud of him, but treated him with a reserve and dignity unusual in the mother of a young child. It was almost as if he had already a secret self which she was not privileged to know, or on which she feared to intrude.

A couple of years passed during which I saw her often as we left our children or picked them up after the day's work; I did not encourage closer acquaintance as I felt that our former professional relationship might cause embarrassment for both of us.

Then, one day, I missed her at the school and after a week had passed without my seeing her, I asked the director if something was wrong. She told me that Matthew was no longer registered at the school, that his father had come from Kentucky and taken the boy home with him.

Rip had come several times to the fence around the school playground and had watched the boy at play, and finally had appeared with Angela to tell the Director that he was taking Matthew home to his farm. Angela had let the boy go directly from the school.

"She was very funny about the whole thing," said the Director. "She said something about a promise made long ago, and about learning to live free. The boy? He accepted his father right away, and went off with him in an old car. They looked as if they had always been together. In fact, Matt seemed to belong more to his father than he ever had to his mother."

I thought again that I had heard the last of Angela Scarlatti, and that her story, so far as I was concerned, was over. My own children began to grow up, my husband changed jobs, and we moved to another city. Then I saw Angela's picture in the paper, identified as the wife of the young policeman at her side. There was a story, too:

"Tragedy struck last night in a Northside tavern. According to witnesses, an argument developed between two patrons, Jack Barth and Rip Phillips. Several other men engaged in the brawl, and at the height of the melee, Barth was fatally stabbed by Phillips.

"At this point Anthony Brindiso, a policeman off duty, entered the tavern and attempted to stop the fight. As he bent to offer first aid to the dying Barth, Phillips attacked him with his knife. Brindiso drew his gun and fired twice, felling his assailant. The second shot went wild and struck Matt Phillips, 8-

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year-old son of Rip, killing the boy instantly. Phillips died in the ambulance. Brindiso was treated for shock and released.

"According to witnesses, Brindiso shot in self-defense, and the death of the boy was an accident. George Johnson, proprietor of the tavern, placed damage to fixtures and stock at $200. Funeral services for Barth are scheduled for Monday, and for Phillips and his son for Tuesday. Neither man has any family."

So Angela had married her nice Italian boy after all, and he was a good cop, and he had, indeed, killed both her lover and her son, as Rip had foretold, and Tony Brindiso never even knew who they were. I know Angela—she would never have told him.

I cut the story from the paper and mailed it to my former Supervisor, marked:

Scarlatti: Contested Adoption.
Closed file: Final Entry.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE PAPERBACKS

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The Thanksgiving Day story in the CALENDAR OF CRIME *. . . How Ellery and Nikki began to observe Thanksgiving in the traditional way—by giving; and how Ellery celebrated untraditionally—by receiving . . .*

THE THANKSGIVING DAY MYSTERY

by ELLERY QUEEN

NOW REGARDING THIS FOLKSY fable, this almost-myth, this canard upon history," continued Ellery, "what are the facts? The facts, my dear Nikki, are these:

"It was *not* a good harvest. Oh, they had twenty acres planted to seed corn, but may I remind you that the corn had been pilfered from the Cape Indians? And had it not been for Tisquantum—"

"Tis-who?" asked Inspector Queen feebly.

"—corruptly known as Squanto—there would have been no harvest that year at all. For it took the last of the more-or-less noble Patuxet to teach our bewildered forefathers how to plant it properly."

"Well, you can't deny they decreed *some* sort of holiday," flashed Nikki, "so that they might 'rejoyce' together!"

"I have no desire to distort the facts," replied Ellery with dignity. "To the contrary. They had excellent reason to 'rejoyce'—some of them were still alive. And tell me: Who actually participated in that first American festival?"

"Why, the Pilgrims," said Inspector Queen uneasily.

"And I suppose you'll tell me that as they stuffed themselves with all the traditional goodies other revered forefathers came running out of the woods with arrows through their hats?"

"I remember a picture like that in my grade-school history book—yes," said Nikki defiantly.

"The *fact* is," grinned Ellery, "they were on such good terms with the Indians during that fall of 1621 that the most enthusiastic celebrants at the feast were Massasoit of the Wampanoag and ninety of his braves!—all very hungry, too. And tell me this: What was the menu on that historic occasion?"

"Turkey!"

"Cranberry sauce!"

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"Pumpkin pie!"

"And—so forth," concluded the Inspector. He was at home that day receiving Madame La Grippe and he had been—until Ellery unleashed his eloquence—the most ungracious host in New York. But now he was neglecting Madame beautifully.

"I accept merely the and-so-forths," said Ellery indulgently. "If they had 'Turkies' at that feast, there is no mention of them in the record. Yes, there were plenty of cranberries in the bogs—but it is more than doubtful that the Pilgrim ladies knew what to do with them. And we can definitely assert that the pastry possibilities of the Narraganset *askútasquash* were not yet dreamed of by the pale green females who had crept off the *Mayflower*."

"Listen to him," said the Inspector comfortably.

"I suppose," said Nikki, grinding her teeth, "I suppose they just sat there and munched on that old corn."

"By no means. The menu was regal, considering their customary diet of wormy meal. They gorged themselves on eels—"

"Eels!"

"And clams, venison, water fowl, and so on. For dessert—wild plums and dried berries; and—let's face it—wild grape wine throughout," said Ellery, looking sad. "And—oh, yes. How long did this first thanksgiving celebration last?"

"Thanksgiving Day? How long would a day *be*? A day!"

"Three days. And why do we celebrate Thanksgiving in the month of November?"

"Because—because—"

"Because the Pilgrims celebrated it in the month of October," concluded Ellery. "And there you have it, Nikki—the whole sordid record of historical misrepresentation, simply another example of our national vainglory. I say, if we must celebrate Thanksgiving, let us give thanks to the red man, whose land we took away. I say—let us have facts!"

"And *I* say," cried Nikki, "that you're a factual showoff, a—a darned old talking encyclopedia, Ellery Queen, and I don't care what your precious 'facts' are because all I wanted to do was take Thanksgiving baskets of turkeys and cranberries and stuff to those people down on the East Side that I take baskets to every year because they're too poor to have decent Thanksgiving dinners tomorrow and especially this year with prices sky-high and so many refugee children here who ought to learn the American traditions and who's to teach them if . . . And anyway, one of them *is* an Indian—'way back—so there!"

"Why, Nikki," mourned Ellery, joining Nikki on the floor where she was now hugging the carpet, in tears, "why didn't you tell me one of them is an Indian? That makes all the difference—don't you see?"

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He sprang erect, glowing fiercely with the spirit of Thanksgiving. "Turkeys! Cranberries! Pumpkin pies! To Mr. Sisquencchi's!"

The adventure of The Telltale Bottle was a very special sort of nastiness culminating in that nastiest of nastinesses, murder; but it is doubtful if, even had Ellery been a lineal descendant of Mother Shipton, he would have called the bountiful excursion off or in any other wise tarnished that silvery day.

For Mr. Sisquencchi of the market around the corner made several glittering suggestions regarding the baskets; there was a lambency about Miss Porter which brightened with the afternoon; and even Manhattan shone, getting into a snowy party dress as Ellery's ancient Duesenberg padded patiently about the East Side.

Ellery lugged baskets and assorted packages through medieval hallways and up donjon staircases until his arms protested; but this was a revolt of the flesh only—the spirit grew fresher as they knocked on the doors of O'Keefes, Del Florios, Cohens, Wilsons, Olsens, Williamses, Pomerantzes, and Johnsons and heard the cries of various Pats, Sammies, Antonios, Olgas, Clarences, and Petunias.

"But where's the Indian?" he demanded, as they sat in the car while Nikki checked over her list. The sun was setting, and several thousand ragamuffins were crawling over the Duesenberg, but it was still a remarkable day.

"Check," said Nikki. "Orchard Street. That's the Indian, Ellery. I mean—oh, she's not an *Indian,* just has some Indian blood way back, Iroquois, I think. She's the last."

"Well, I won't quibble," frowned Ellery, easing old Duesey through the youth of America. "Although I *do* wish—"

"Oh, shut up. Mother Carey's the darlingest old lady—scrubs floors for a living."

"Mother Carey's!"

But at the Orchard Street tenement, under a canopy of ermine-trimmed fire escapes, a janitor was all they found of Ellery's Indian.

"The old hag don't live here no more."

"Oh, dear," said Nikki. "Where's she moved to?"

"She lammed outa here with all her junk in a rush the other day—search me." The janitor spat, just missing Nikki's shoe.

"Any idea where the old lady works?" asked Ellery, just missing the janitor's shoe.

The janitor hastily withdrew his foot. "I think she cleans up some frog chow joint near Canal Street regular."

"I remember!" cried Nikki. "Fouchet's, Ellery. She's worked there for years. Let's go right over there—maybe they know her new address."

"Fouchet's!" said Ellery gaily; and so infected was he by the en-

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chantment of the fairy-tale afternoon that for once his inner voice failed him.

Fouchet's Restaurant was just off Canal Street, a few blocks from Police Headquarters—squeezed between a button factory and a ship chandler's. Cars with Brooklyn accents whished by its plate-glass front, and it looked rather frightened by it all. Inside they found round tables covered with checkered oilcloths, a wine bar, walls decorated with prewar French travel posters, a sharp and saucy odor, and a cashier named Clothilde.

Clothilde had a large bosom, a large cameo on it, a large black-velvet ribbon in her hair, and when she opened her mouth to say, "The old woman who clean up?" Nikki saw that she also had a large gold tooth. "Ask Monsieur Fouchet. 'E will be right back." She examined Nikki with very sharp black eyes.

"If the Pilgrims could eat eels," Ellery was mumbling, over a menu. "Why not? *Escargots!* Nikki, let's have dinner here!"

"Well," said Nikki doubtfully. "I suppose . . . as long as we have to wait for Mr. Fouchet anyway . . ."

A waiter with a long dreary face led them to a table, and Ellery and the waiter conferred warmly over the menu, but Nikki was not paying attention—she was too busy exchanging brief feminine glances with Clothilde. It was agreed: the ladies did not care for each other. Thereafter, Clothilde wore an oddly watchful expression, and Nikki looked uneasy.

"Ellery . . ." said Nikki.

"—only the very best," Ellery was saying baronially. "Now where the devil did that waiter go? I hadn't got to the wine. Pierre!"

"Un moment, Monsieur," came the voice of the waiter with the long dreary face.

"You know, Nikki, less than five per cent of all the wine produced in the world can be called really fine wine—"

"Ellery, I don't like this place," said Nikki.

"The rest is *pour la soif*—"

"Let's not eat here after all, Ellery. Let's just find out about Mother Carey and—"

Ellery looked astonished. "Why, Nikki, I thought you loved French food. Consequently, we'll order the rarest, most exquisitely balanced, most perfectly fermented wine—Pierre! Where the deuce has he gone? A Sauterne with body, bouquet, breeding . . ."

"Oh!" squeaked Nikki, then she looked guilty. It was only Pierre, breathing down her neck.

"After all, it's a special occasion. Ah, there you are. *La carte des vins!* No, never mind, I know what I want. Pierre," said Ellery magnificently, "a bottle of *Château d'Yquem!*"

The dreary look on the waiter's face rather remarkably vanished.

"But Monsieur," he murmured, *"Château d'Yquem?* That is an ex-

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pensive wine. We do not carry so fine a wine in our cellar."

And still, as Pierre said this, he contrived to give the impression that something of extraordinary importance had just occurred. Nikki glanced anxiously at Ellery to see if he had caught that strange overtone; but Ellery was merely looking crushed.

"Carried away by the spirit of Thanksgiving Eve. Very stupid of me, Pierre. Of course. Give us the best you have—which," Ellery added as Pierre walked rapidly away, "will probably turn out to be *vin ordinaire.*" And Ellery laughed.

Something is horribly wrong, thought Nikki; and she wondered how long it would take Ellery to become himself again.

It happened immediately after the *pêches flambeaux* and the *demi-tasse*. Or, rather, two things happened. One involved the waiter. The other involved Clothilde.

The waiter seemed confused: upon handing Ellery *l'addition,* he simultaneously whisked a fresh napkin into Ellery's lap! This astounding *non sequitur* brought Mr. Queen to his slumbering senses. But he made no remark, merely felt the napkin, and, finding something hard and flat concealed in its folds, he extracted it without looking at it and slipped it into his pocket.

As for the cashier, she too seemed confused. In payment of *l'addition,* Ellery tossed a twenty-dollar bill on the desk. Clothilde made change, chattering pleasantly all the while about *Monsieur* and *Mad'moiselle* and 'ow did they like the dinner? —and she made change very badly. She was ten dollars short.

Ellery had just pointed out this deplorable unfamiliarity with the American coinage system when a stout little whirlwind arrived, scattering French before him like leaves.

"*Mais Monsieur Fouchet, je fais une méprise . . .*"

"*Bête à manger du foin—silence!*" And M. Fouchet fell upon Ellery, almost weeping. "*Monsieur,* this 'as never 'appen before. I give you my assurance—"

For a chilled moment Nikki thought Ellery was going to produce what lay in his pocket for M. Fouchet's inspection. But Ellery merely smiled and accepted the missing ten-dollar bill graciously and asked for Mother Carey's address.

M. Fouchet threw up his hands and ran to the rear of the restaurant and ran back to press an oil-stained scrawl upon them, chattering in French at Ellery, at Nikki, at his cashier; and then they were on the street and making for the Duesenberg in a great show of postprandial content . . . for through the plate glass M. Fouchet, and Clothilde and—yes—Pierre of the long face were watching them closely.

"Ellery, what . . . ?"

"Not now, Nikki. Get into the car."

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Nikki kept glancing nervously at the three Gallic faces as Ellery tried to start the Duesenberg. "Huh?"

"I said it won't start, blast it. Battery." Ellery jumped out into the snow and began tugging at the basket. "Grab those other things and get out, Nikki."

"But—"

"Cab!" A taxicab parked a few yards beyond Fouchet's shot forward. "Driver, get this basket and stuff in there beside you, will you? Nikki, hop to it. Get into the cab!"

"You're leaving the *car?*"

"We can pick it up later. What are you waiting for, driver?"

The driver looked weary. "Ain't you startin' your Thanksgivin' celebratin' a little premature?" he asked. "I ain't no fortune-teller. Where do I go?"

"Oh. That slip Fouchet gave me. Nikki, where . . .? Here! 214-B Henry Street. The East Side."

The cab slid away. "Wanna draw me diagrams?" muttered the driver.

"Now, Nikki. Let's have a look at Pierre's little gift."

It was a stiff white-paper packet. Ellery unfolded it.

It contained a large quantity of a powdery substance—a white crystalline powder.

"Looks like snow," giggled Nikki. "What is it?"

"That's what it is."

"Snow?"

"Cocaine."

"That's the hell of this town," the cab driver was remarking. "Anything can happen. I remember once —"

"Apparently, Nikki," said Ellery with a frown, "I gave Pierre some password or other. By accident."

"He thought you're an addict! That means Fouchet is—"

"A depot for the distribution of narcotics. I wonder what I said that made Pierre . . . *The wine!*"

"I don't follow you," complained the driver.

Ellery glared. The driver looked hurt and honked at an elderly Chinese in a black straw hat.

"Château d'Yquem, Nikki. That was the password! Pearls in a swinery . . . of course, of course."

"I *knew* something was wrong the minute we walked in there, Ellery."

"Mmm. We'll drop this truck at Mrs. Carey's, then we'll shoot back uptown and get Dad working on this Fouchet nastiness."

"Watch the Inspector snap out of that cold," laughed Nikki; then she stopped laughing. "Ellery, do you suppose all this has anything to do with Mother Carey?"

"Oh, nonsense, Nikki."

It was a bad day for the master.

For when they got to 214-B Henry Street and knocked on the door of Apartment 3-A and a voice as shaky as the stairs called out, "Who's there?" and Nikki identified herself . . . something happened. There were certain sounds. Strange rum-

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bly, sliding sounds. The door was not opened at once.

Nikki bit her lip, glancing timidly at Ellery. Ellery was frowning.

"She don't act any too anxious to snag this turk-bird," said the cab driver, who had carried up the pumpkin pie and the bottle of California wine which had been one of Mr. Sisquencchi's inspirations, while Nikki took odds and ends and Ellery the noble basket. "My old lady'd be tickled to death—"

"I'd rather it were you," said Ellery violently. "When she opens the door, dump the pie and wine inside, then wait for us in the cab—"

But at that instant the door opened, and a chubby little old woman with knobby forearms and flushed cheeks stood there, looking not even remotely like an Indian.

"Miss Porter!"

"Mother Carey."

It was a poor little room with an odor. Not the odor of poverty; the room was savagely clean. Ellery barely listened to the chirrupings of the two women: he was too busy using his eyes and his nose. He seemed to have forgotten Massasoit and the Wampanoag.

When they were back in the cab, he said abruptly, "Nikki, do you happen to recall Mother Carey's old apartment?"

"The one on Orchard Street? Yes —why?"

"How many rooms did she have there?"

"Two. A bedroom and a kitchen. Why?"

Ellery asked casually, "Did she always live alone?"

"I think so."

"Then why has she suddenly—so very suddenly, according to that Orchard Street janitor—moved to a *three*-room flat?"

"You mean the Henry Street place has—?"

"Three rooms—from the doors. Now why should a poor old scrubwoman living alone need an *extra* room?"

"Cinch," said the cab driver. "She's takin' in boarders."

"Yes," murmured Ellery. "Yes, I suppose that might account for the odor of cheap cigar smoke."

"Cigar smoke!"

"Maybe she's runnin' a horse parlor," suggested the driver.

"Look, friend," said Nikki angrily, "how about letting us take the wheel and you coming back here?"

"Keep your bra on, lady."

"The fact is," mused Ellery, "before she opened her door she moved furniture away from it. Those sounds? She'd barricaded that door, Nikki."

"Yes," said Nikki in a small voice. "And that doesn't sound like a boarder, does it?"

"It sounds," said Ellery, "like a hideout." He leaned forward just as the driver opened his mouth. "And don't bother," he said. "Nikki, it's somebody who can't go out —or doesn't dare to . . . I'm begin-

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ning to think there's a connection between the cigar smoker your Mrs. Carey's hiding, and the packet of drugs Pierre slipped to me at Fouchet's by mistake."

"Oh, no, Ellery," moaned Nikki.

Ellery took her hand. "It's a rotten way to wind up a heavenly day, honey, but we have no choice. I'll have Dad give orders to arrest Pierre tonight the minute we get home, and let's hope . . . Hang the Pilgrims!"

"That's subversive propaganda, brother," said the driver.

Ellery shut the communicating window, violently.

Inspector Queen sniffled. "She's in it, all right."

"Mother Carey?" wailed Nikki.

"Three years ago," nodded the Inspector, drawing his bathrobe closer about him, "Fouchet's was mixed up in a drug peddling case. And a Mrs. Carey was connected with it."

Nikki began to cry.

"Connected how, Dad?"

"One of Fouchet's waiters was the passer—"

"Pierre?"

"No. Pierre was working there at that time—or at least a waiter of that name was—but the guilty waiter was an old man named Carey . . . whose wife was a scrubwoman."

"Lo the poor Indian," said Ellery, and he sat down with his pipe. After a moment he said, "Where's Carey now, Dad?"

"In the clink doing a tenner. We found a couple of hundred dollars' worth of snow in the old geezer's bedroom—they lived on Mulberry then. Carey claimed he was framed—but they all do."

"And Fouchet?"

"Came out okay. Apparently he hadn't known. It was Carey all by himself."

"Strange. It's still going on."

The Inspector looked startled.

Nikki cried, "Mr. Carey was *framed!*"

"Could be," muttered the old gentleman. "Might have been this Pierre all the time—felt the heat on and gave us a quick decoy. Nikki, hand me the phone."

"I knew it, I knew it!"

"And while you're on the phone, Dad," said Ellery mildly, "you might ask why Headquarters hasn't picked up Carey."

"Picked him up? I told you Ellery, he's in stir. Hello?"

"Oh, no, he's not," said Ellery. "He's hiding out in Apartment 3-A at 214-B Henry Street."

"The cigar smoke," breathed Nikki. "The barricade. The extra room!"

"Velie!" snarled the Inspector. "Has a con named Frank Carey broken out of stir?"

Sergeant Velie, bewildered by this clairvoyance, stammered, "Yeah, Inspector, a few days ago, ain't been picked up yet, we're tryin' to locate his wife but she's moved and—but you been home sick!"

"She's moved," sighed the Inspec-

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tor. "Well, well, she's probably moved to China." Then he roared, "She's hiding him out! But never mind—you take those Number Fourteens of yours right down to Fouchet's Restaurant just off Canal and arrest a waiter named Pierre! And if he isn't there, don't take two weeks finding out where he lives. I want that man tonight!"

"But Carey—"

"I'll take care of Carey myself. Go on—don't waste a second!" The old man hung up, fuming. "Where's my pants, dad blast the—?"

"Dad!" Ellery grabbed him. "You're not going out *now*. You're still sick."

"I'm picking up Carey personally," said his father gently. "Do you think you're man enough to stop me?"

The old scrubwoman sat at her kitchen table stolidly and this time the Iroquois showed.

There was no one else in the Henry Street apartment.

"We know your husband was here, Mrs. Carey," said Inspector Queen. "He got word to you when he broke out of jail, you moved, and you've been hiding him here. Where's he gone to now?"

The old lady said nothing.

"Mother Carey, please," said Nikki. "We want to help you."

"We believe your husband was innocent of that drug-passing charge, Mrs. Carey," said Ellery quietly.

The bluish lips tightened. The basket, the turkey, the pumpkin pie, the bottle of wine, the packages were still on the table, untouched.

"I think, Dad," said Ellery, "Mrs. Carey wants a bit more evidence of official good faith. Mother, suppose I tell you I not only believe your husband was framed three years ago, but that the one who framed him was—"

"That Pierre," said Mother Carey in a hard voice. "He was the one. He was the brains. He used to be 'friendly' with Frank."

"The one—but not the brains."

"What d'ye mean, Ellery?" demanded Inspector Queen.

"Isn't Pierre working alone?" asked Nikki.

"If he is, would he have handed me—a total stranger—a valuable packet of dope without a single word about payment?" asked Ellery dryly.

Mother Carey was staring up at him.

"Those were Pierre's instructions," said the Inspector slowly.

"Exactly. So there's someone behind Pierre who's using him as the passer, payment being arranged by some other means—"

"Probably in advance!" The Inspector leaned forward. "Well, Mrs. Carey, won't you talk now? Where is Frank?"

"Tell the Inspector, Mother," begged Nikki. "The truth!"

Mother Carey looked uncertain. But then she said, "We told the

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truth three years ago," and folded her lacerated hands.

There is a strength in the oppressed which yields to nothing.

"Let it go," sighed the Inspector. "Come on, son—we'll go over to Fouchet's and have a little chin with Pierre, find out who his bossman is—"

And it was then that Mother Carey said, in a frightened quick voice, "No!" and put her hand to her mouth, appalled.

"Carey's gone to Fouchet's," said Ellery slowly. "Of course, Mrs. Carey would have a key—she probably opens the restaurant. Carey's gone over with some desperate idea that he can dig up some evidence that will clear him. That's it, Mother, isn't it?"

But Inspector Queen was already out in the unsavory hall.

Sergeant Velie was standing miserably in the entrance to Fouchet's when the squad car raced up.

"Now Inspector, don't get mad —"

The Inspector said benignly, "You let Pierre get away."

"Oh, no!" said Sergeant Velie. "Pierre's in there, Inspector. Only he's dead."

"Dead!"

"Dead of what, Sergeant?" asked Ellery swiftly.

"Of a carvin' knife in the chest, that's of what, Maestro. We came right over here like you said, Inspector, only some knife artist beat us to it." The Sergeant relaxed. It was all right. The Old Man was smiling.

"Frank Carey did it, of course?"

The Sergeant stopped relaxing. "Heck, no, Inspector. Carey didn't do it."

"Velie—!"

"Well, he didn't! When we rolled up we spot Carey right here at the front door. Place is closed for the night—just a night light. He's got a key. We watch him unlock the door, go in, and wham! he damn' near falls over this Pierre. So the feeble-minded old cluck bends down and takes the knife out of Pierre's chest and stands there in a trance lookin' at it. He's been standin' like that ever since."

"Without the knife. I hope," said the Inspector acidly; and they went in.

And found an old man among the detectives in the posture of a question mark leaning against an oilcloth-covered table under a poster advertising Provençal, with his toothless mouth ajar and his watery old eyes fixed on the extinct *garçon*. The extinct *garçon* was still in his monkey-suit; his right palm was upturned, as if appealing for mercy, or the usual *pourboire*.

"Carey," said Inspector Queen.

Old man Carey did not seem to hear. He was fascinated by Ellery, who was on one knee, peering at Pierre's eyes.

"Carey, who killed this Frenchman?"

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Carey did not reply.

"Plain case of busted gut," remarked Sergeant Velie.

"You can hardly blame him!" cried Nikki. "Framed for dope peddling three years ago, convicted, jailed for it—and now he thinks he's being framed for murder!"

"I wish we could get something out of him," said the Inspector thoughtfully. "It's a cinch Pierre stayed after closing time because he had a date with somebody."

"His boss!" said Nikki.

"Whoever he's been passing the snow for, Nikki."

"Dad." Ellery was on his feet looking down at the long dreary face that now seemed longer and drearier. "Do you recall if Pierre was ticketed as a drug addict three years ago?"

"I don't think he was." The Inspector looked surprised.

"Look at his eyes."

"Say!"

"Far gone, too. If Pierre wasn't an addict at the time of Carey's arrest, he'd taken to the habit in the past three years. And that explains why he was murdered tonight."

"He got dangerous," said the Inspector grimly. "With Carey loose and Pierre pulling that boner with you tonight, the boss knew the whole Fouchet investigation would be reopened."

Ellery nodded. "Felt he couldn't trust Pierre any longer. Weakened by drugs, the fellow would talk as soon as the police pulled him in, and this mysterious character knew it."

"Yeah," said the Sergeant sagely. "Put the heat on a smecker and he squirts like whipped cream."

But Ellery wasn't listening. He had sat down at one of the silent tables and was staring over at the wine bar.

M. Fouchet flew in dressed in a strong tweed overcoat and showing a dent in his Homburg where it should not have been.

"Selling of the dope—again! This *Pierre* . . .!" snarled M. Fouchet, and he glared down at his late waiter with quite remarkable venom.

"Know anything about this job, Fouchet?" asked the Inspector courteously.

"Nothing, *Monsieur l'inspecteur*. I give you my word, no thing. Pierre stay late tonight. He says to me he will fix up the tables for tomorrow. He stays and—pfft! *il se fait tuer!*" M. Fouchet's fat lips began to dance. "Now the bank will give me no more credit." He sank into a chair.

"Oh? You're not in good shape financially, Fouchet?"

"I serve *escargots* near Canal Street. It should be pretzels! The bank, I owe 'im five thousand dollar."

"And that's the way it goes," said the Inspector sympathetically. "All right, Mr. Fouchet, go home. Where's that cashier?"

A detective pushed Clothilde for-

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ward. Clothilde had been weeping into her make-up. But not now. Now she glared down at Pierre quite as M. Fouchet had glared. Pierre glared back.

"Clothilde?" muttered Ellery, suddenly coming out of deep reverie.

"Velie turned up something," whispered the Inspector.

"She's in it. She's got something to do with it," Nikki said excitedly to Ellery. "I knew it!"

"Clothilde," said the Inspector, "how much do you make in this restaurant?"

"Sixty-five dollar a week."

Sergeant Velie drawled, "How much dough you got in the bank, Mademazelle?"

Clothilde glanced at the behemoth very quickly indeed. Then she began to sniffle, shaking in several places. "I 'ave no money in the bank. Oh, maybe a few dollar—"

"This is your bankbook, isn't it, Clothilde?" asked the Inspector.

Clothilde stopped sniffling just as quickly as she had begun. "Where do you get that? Give it to me!"

"Uh-uh-uh," said the Sergeant, embracing her. "Say . . .!"

She flung his arm off. "That is my bankbook!"

"And it shows," murmured the Inspector, "deposits totaling more than twenty thousand dollars, Clothilde. Rich uncle?"

"Voleurs! That is my money! I save!"

"She's got a new savings system, Inspector," explained the Sergeant. "Out of sixty-five bucks per week, she manages to sock away, some weeks, seventy, some weeks eighty-five. . . . It's wonderful. How do you do it, Cloey?"

Nikki glanced at Ellery, startled. He nodded gloomily.

"Fils de lapin! Jongleur! Chien-loup!" Clothilde was screaming. "All right! Some time I short-change the customer. I am cashier, *non?* But—nothing else!"

Ellery got up from the table, drew his father aside, and said, "Come on back to Mother Carey's."

"What for, Ellery? I'm not through here—"

"I want to wash this thing up. Tomorrow's Thanksgiving, poor Nikki is out on her feet—"

"Ellery," said Nikki.

He nodded, still gloomily.

The sight of his wife turned old man Carey into a human being again, and he clung to her and blubbered that he had done nothing and they were trying to frame him for the second time only this time it was the hot seat they were steering him into. And Mrs. Carey kept nodding and picking lint off his jacket collar. And Nikki tried to look invisible.

"Where's Velie?" grumbled the Inspector. He seemed irritated by Carey's blubbering and the fact that Ellery had insisted on sending all the detectives home, as if this were a piece of business too delicate for the boys' sensibilities.

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"I've sent Velie on an errand," Ellery replied, and then he said, "Mr. and Mrs. Carey, would you go into that room there and shut the door?"

Mother Carey took her husband by the hand without a word. And when the door has closed behind them, Ellery said abruptly, "Dad, I asked you to arrest Pierre tonight. You phoned Velie to hurry right over to Fouchet's. Velie obeyed—and found the waiter stabbed to death."

"So?"

"Police Headquarters is on Centre Street. Fouchet's is just off Canal. A few blocks apart."

"Hey?"

"Didn't it strike you as extraordinary," Ellery went on, "that Pierre should have been murdered *so quickly*? Before Velie could negotiate those few blocks?"

"You mean this boss dope peddler struck so fast to keep his man from being arrested? We went through all that before, son."

"Hm," said Ellery. "But what did Pierre's killer have to know in order to strike so quickly tonight? Two things: that Pierre had slipped me a packet of dope by mistake this evening; and that I was intending to have Pierre pulled in *tonight*."

"But Ellery," said Nikki with a frown, "nobody knew about either of those things except you, me, and the Inspector. . . ."

"Interesting?"

"I don't get it," growled his father. "The killer knew Pierre was going to be picked up even before Velie reached Fouchet's. He must have, because he beat Velie to it. But if only the three of us knew—"

"Exactly—then how did the killer find out?"

"I give up," said the Inspector promptly. He had discovered many years before that this was, after all, the best way.

But Nikki was young. "Someone overheard you talking it over with me and the Inspector?"

"Well, let's see. Nikki. We discussed it with Dad in our apartment when we got back from Mrs. Carey's. . . ."

"But nobody could have overheard *there*," said the Inspector.

"Then Ellery, you and I must have been overheard before we got to the apartment."

"Good enough, Nikki. And the only place you and I discussed the case—the only place we *could* have discussed it. . . ."

"Ellery!"

"We opened the packet in the cab on our way over to Henry Street here," nodded Ellery, "and we discussed its contents quite openly—in the cab. In fact," he added dryly, "if you'll recall, Nikki, our conversational cab driver joined the discussion with enthusiasm."

"The cab driver," said Inspector Queen softly.

"Whom we had picked up just outside Fouchet's, Dad, where he was parked. It fits.

"The same cab driver," Ellery

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went on glumly, "who took us back uptown from here, Nikki—remember? And it was on that uptown trip that I told you I was going to have Dad arrest Pierre tonight. . . . Yes, the cab driver, and only the cab driver—the only outsider who could have overheard the two statements which would make the boss dope peddler kill his pusher quickly to prevent an arrest, a police grilling, and an almost certain revelation of the boss's identity."

"Works a cab," muttered the Inspector. "Cute dodge. Parks outside his headquarters. Probably hacks his customers to Fouchet's and collects beforehand. Let Pierre pass the white stuff afterward. Probably carted them away." He looked up, beaming. "Great work, son! I'll nail that hackie so blasted fast—"

"You'll nail whom, Dad?" asked Ellery, still glum.

"The cab driver!"

"But who is the cab driver?"

Ellery is not proud of this incident.

"You're asking *me*?" howled his father.

Nikki was biting her lovely nails. "Ellery. I didn't even *notice*—"

"Ha, ha," said Ellery. "That's what I was afraid of."

"Do you mean to say," said Inspector Queen in a terrible voice, "that *my son* didn't read a hack police-identity card?"

"Er . . ."

"It's the *LAW*!"

"It's Thanksgiving Eve, Dad," muttered Ellery. "Squanto—the Pilgrims—the Iroquois heritage of Mother Carey—"

"Stop driveling! Can't you give me a description?"

"Er . . ."

"No description," whispered his father. It was really the end of all things.

"Inspector, *nobody* looks at a cab driver," said Nikki brightly. "You know. A cab driver? He—he's just there."

But the Inspector was speechless.

"The invisible man," said Ellery hopefully. "Chesterton?"

"Oh, so you do remember his name!"

"No, no, Dad—"

"I'd know his voice," said Nikki. "If I ever heard it again."

"We'd have to catch him first, and if we caught him we'd hardly need his voice!"

"Maybe he'll come cruising back around Fouchet's."

The Inspector let out one laughing bark.

"Fine thing. Know who did it—and might's well not know. Listen to me, you detective. You're going over to the Hack License Bureau with me, and you're going to look over the photo of every last cab jockey in—"

"Wait. Wait!"

Ellery flung himself at Mother Carey's vacated chair. He sat on the bias, chin propped on the heel of his hand, knitting his brows, un-

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knitting them, knitting them again, until Nikki thought there was something wrong with his eyes. Then he shifted and repeated the process in the opposite direction.

His father watched him with great suspicion. This was not Ellery tonight; it was someone else. All these gyrations . . .

Ellery leaped to his feet, kicking the chair over. "I've got it! We've got him!"

"How? What?"

"Nikki." Ellery's tone was mysterious, dramatic—let's face it, thought the old gentleman: corny. "Remember when we lugged the stuff from the cab up to Mother Carey's kitchen here? The cab driver helped us up—*carried this bottle of wine.*"

"Huh?" gaped the Inspector. Then he cried, "No, no, Nikki, don't touch it!" And he chortled over the bottle of California wine. "*Prints.* That's it, son—that's my boy! We'll just take this little old bottle of grape back to Headquarters, bring out the fingerprints, compare the prints on it with the file sets at the Hack Bureau—"

"Oh, yeah?" said the cab driver. He was standing in the open doorway. There was a dirty handkerchief tied around his face below the eyes and his cap was pulled low, and he was pointing an automatic midway between father and son.

"I thought you were up to somethin' when you all came back here from Fouchet's," he sneered. "And then leavin' this door open so I could hear the whole thing. You—the old guy. Hand me that bottle of wine."

"You're not very bright," said Ellery wearily "All right, Sergeant, shoot it out of his hand."

And Ellery embraced his father and his secretary and fell to Mother Carey's spotless floor with them as Sergeant Velie stepped into the doorway behind the cab driver and very carefully shot the gun out of the invisible man's hand.

"Happy Thanksgivin', sucker," said the Sergeant.

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Edgar Gault found the solution to his personal problem in the detective novels of John Dickson Carr. Surely this is a dangerous precedent! . . . An amusing story which has all the earmarks of a potentially amusing series. Who will serve as the "inspiration," the "source," the "model" for the next story? Rex Stout? Erle Stanley Gardner? Agatha Christie? . . . Can we say at last that fiction is stranger than truth?

THE MAN WHO READ JOHN DICKSON CARR

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

ALTHOUGH HE DID NOT REALIZE IT at the time, Edgar Gault's life first gained purpose and direction when, at the age of twelve, he idly picked up a copy of John Dickson Carr's *The Problem of the Wire Cage* at his neighborhood lending library. That evening after supper he sat down with the book and read until bedtime. Then, smuggling the book into his room, he finished it by flashlight under the sheets.

He returned to the library the following day for another of Carr's books, *The Arabian Nights Murder,* which took him two days to finish—Edgar's governess had confiscated the flashlight. Within a week he read every John Dickson Carr mystery the library had on its shelves. His gloom on the day he finished reading the last one turned to elation when he learned that his favorite author also wrote under the pseudonym of Carter Dickson.

In the course of the next ten years Edgar accompanied Dr. Gideon Fell, Sir Henry Merrivale, et al. through every locked room in the Carr-Dickson repertoire. He was exultant the day his knowledge of an elusive point in high school physics allowed him to solve the mystery of *The Man Who Could Not Shudder* before the author saw fit to give his explanation. It was probably then that Edgar made his momentous decision.

One day he, Edgar Gault, would commit a locked room murder which would mystify the master himself.

An orphan, Edgar lived with his uncle in a huge rambling house in a remote section of Vermont. The house was not only equipped with a library—that boon to mystery writers, but something few modern houses possess—but the library had barred windows and a two-inch-

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hick oak door which, opening into he room, could be locked only by olacing a ponderous wooden bar nto iron carriers bolted solidly to he wall on both sides of the door. There were no secret passages. The oom, in short, would have pleased ny of Carr's detectives, and it suited Edgar perfectly.

The victim, of course, would be Edgar's Uncle Daniel. Not only was he readily available, but he was a believer in Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance, and in order to help Edgar achieve hat happy condition, Uncle Daniel had decided to cut the youth out of his will in the near future.

Since Edgar was perfectly prepared to wallow in his uncle's filthy ucre all the days of his life, it was up to him to do the old man in before the will could be changed.

All of which serves only to explain why Edgar, one bright day in early spring, was standing inside he library fireplace, covered with oot and scrubbing the inside of the himney until it gleamed.

The chimney, of course, was Edgar's means of escape from his ocked room. It was just large nough to accommodate his slim ody and had an iron ladder which an up the inside for the convenence of a chimney sweep. The necessity of escape by chimney omewhat disappointed Edgar, ince Dr. Gideon Fell had ruled it ut during his famous locked-room ecture in *The Three Coffins*. But it was the only exit available, and Edgar had devised a scheme to make use of it that he was sure even John Dickson Carr would approve of. Maybe Edgar would even get a book written about his crime —like Carr's *The Murder of Sir Edmund Godfrey*.

It didn't worry Edgar that he would be immediately suspected of the crime. Nobody saw his preparations—Uncle Daniel was away on business, and the cook and gardener were on vacation. And at the time the crime would actually be committed, Edgar would have two unimpeachable witnesses to testify that neither he—nor, for that matter, any other human being—could possibly have been the murderer.

Finishing his scrubbing, Edgar carried the pail of water to the kitchen and emptied it down the drain. Then, after a thorough shower to rid his body of soot, he went to the linen closet, took out a newly washed bedsheet, and returned to the library. Wrapping the sheet around him, he got back into the fireplace and began to climb the iron ladder. Reaching the top, he came down again, purposely rubbing the sheet against the stones at frequent intervals.

Stepping back into the library, he walked to a window, removed the sheet, and held it up to the sunlight. Although wrinkled, it had remained gleamingly white. Edgar smiled as he put the sheet into a hamper. Then, going upstairs, he unlocked

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the window of a storeroom beside which the chimney rose. After that, in his own room, he dressed in clothing chosen especially for the crime—white shirt, white trousers, and white tennis shoes. Finally, he removed a long cavalry saber from the wall, took it to the library, and stood it in a shadowy corner.

His preparations were nearly complete.

Early that evening, from his chair in the music room, Edgar heard his uncle's return. "Edgar? You home?" The nasal New England twang of Uncle Daniel's voice bespoke two hundred years of unbroken Vermont ancestry.

"I'm in here, Uncle Daniel—in the music room."

"Ayah," said Daniel, looking in through the door. "That's the trouble with you, young fella. You think more o' strummin' that guitar than you do about gettin' ahead in the world. Business first, boy—that's the only ticket for success."

"Why, Uncle, I've been working on a business arrangement most of the day. I just finished about an hour ago."

"Well, I meant what I said about my will, Edgar," Uncle Daniel continued. "In fact, I'm going to talk to Stoper about it tonight when he comes over for cards."

Even the weekly game of bridge, in which Edgar was usually a reluctant fourth to Uncle Daniel, Lemuel Stoper, and Dr. Harold Crowley, was a part of The Plan. Even the perfect crime needs witnesses to its perfection.

Later, as Edgar arranged the last of three armloads of wood in the library fireplace—and added to the kindling a small jar from his pocket—he heard the heavy knocker of the front door bang three times. He took the opportunity to set his watch. Exactly seven o'clock.

"Take the gentlemen to the music room and make them comfortable," said Uncle Daniel. "Give 'em a drink and get the card table ready. I'll be in presently."

"Why must they always wait for you, Uncle?" asked Edgar, his assumed frown almost a smirk.

"They'll wait forever for me and like it, if that's what I want. They know where the biggest part of their earnings comes from, all right." And still another part of Edgar's plan dropped neatly into place.

Entering the old house, Lemuel Stoper displayed, as always, an attitude of disdain toward everything not directly involved with Uncle Daniel's considerable fortune. "White, white, and more white," he sneered, looking at Edgar's clothing. "You look like a waiter in a restaurant."

"Don't let him get to you, boy," said a voice from outside. "You look fine. Been playin' tennis?" Dr. Crowley, who reminded Edgar of a huge lump of clear gelatine, waddled in and smiled benignly.

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"No need to butter the boy up any more," said Stoper. "Dan'l's changin' his will tonight."

"Oh," said Crowley, surprised. "That's too bad, boy—uh—Edgar."

"Yes, Uncle has already spoken to me about his decision," said Edgar. "I'm in complete agreement with it." No sense in providing *too* much in the way of a motive.

In a small but important change from the usual routine Edgar led the men to the door of the library on the way to the music room. "Uncle," he called. "Dr. Crowley and Mr. Stoper are here."

"I know they're here," growled Daniel. "Wait in the music room. I'll be along in a few minutes."

The two men had seen Uncle Daniel alive and well. Everything was now ready.

In the music room Edgar poured drinks and set up the card table. Then he snapped his fingers and raised his eyebrows—the perfect picture of a man who has just remembered something.

"I must have left the cards upstairs," he said. "I'll go and find them." And before his guests could answer, he left the room.

Once through the door, Edgar's pace quickened. He reached the door of the library eight seconds later. Ignoring his uncle's surprised expression, Edgar took the saber from its corner and strode to the desk where Daniel sat, a newspaper still in his hand.

"Edgar, what in—" Without a word Edgar thrust the sword violently at his uncle. The point entered Daniel's wattled neck just below the chin and penetrated the neck to the back of the chair, pinning the old man to his place. Edgar chuckled, recalling a similar scene in Carr's *The Bride of Newgate*.

He held the sword in place for several seconds. Then he felt carefully for a pulse. None. The murder had been carried off exactly as planned—in seventy seconds.

Hurrying to the fireplace, Edgar picked up the small jar he had placed there earlier. Then, shuffling his feet through the generous supply of paper among the kindling and wood, he pulled the tall fire screen into place and began to climb up the chimney. Reaching the top, he glanced at his watch. Two minutes had gone by since he had left Stoper and Crowley.

Standing on the roof beside the chimney, Edgar removed several small pieces of blank paper from the jar. He had prepared the paper himself from a formula in a book on World War II sabotage operations. These "calling cards" were designed to burst into flame shortly after being exposed to the air. During the war they had been dropped from planes to start fires in fields of enemy grain. Edgar, who had shortened the time needed to make them ignite, knew the pieces of paper would start a fire in the library fireplace.

Dropping the papers down the

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chimney, he waited a few seconds, and finally was rewarded with a blast of warm air coming up through the opening. Three minutes and ten seconds. Right on schedule.

Edgar moved along the slanted roof to a large decorative gable in which was set the storeroom window. Carefully inching along the edge of the roof, he raised the window and scrambled inside, taking care not to get dust or dirt on his clothing. He went to his own room, took a fresh deck of cards he had left there earlier, then trotted loudly down the stairs to the music room. He rejoined the two guests a little less than five minutes after he had left them—again exactly as planned.

Edgar apologized for his short absence, privately gloating over the unsullied whiteness of his clothing. Surely he could not just have climbed up the inside of a chimney from which smoke was now issuing.

Soon Stoper became restless. "I wonder what's keepin' Dan'l?" he grumbled.

"Mebbe we'd better fetch him," said Crowley.

As they rose, Edgar attempted a yawn while his heart pounded wildly. "I believe I'll wait here," he said, trying to act nonchalant.

John Dickson Carr would be proud of me, thought Edgar as Stoper and Crowley left the room. He hoped that the investigation of his crime would not include any theories involving the supernatural. He remembered his disappointment at the ending in *The Burning Court* with its overtones of witchcraft.

Odd, he thought, that there was no shouting, no crashing sounds as the two old men tried to batter down the heavy library door. But there was no need to worry. The plan was perfect, foolproof. It was—

In the doorway of the music room appeared the figure of Lemuel Stoper, looking tired and beaten. In his hand he held a revolver from Uncle Daniel's desk.

"Did his money mean that much to you, boy?" Stoper asked, his voice trembling with shock and rage. "Is that why you did it?"

For only a moment Edgar wondered how Mr. Stoper had got into the library so fast. And then suddenly he knew. For a fleeting instant he wondered if a plea of insanity would help. But then nobody would appreciate the perfect crime he had devised. What would Dr. Fell think of him now? What would H. M. think? What would John Dickson Carr himself think?

What could anyone think of a locked room murder in which the murderer had forgotten to lock the door?

EDITORIAL POSTSCRIPT: Well, what do you know! Before we

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could go to press with William Brittain's *The Man Who Read John Dickson Carr,* the author sent in a second story. And which detective story writer do you think "inspired" Mr. Brittain to convert the first story into a series? The title of the second story tells . . .

THE MAN WHO READ ELLERY QUEEN

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

To make the transition to institutional living easier, each resident of the Goodwell Senior Citizens Home was allowed to retain one item of personal property. Some of the old men kept their stamp collections, others preferred to treasure voluminous photograph albums. One senior citizen, Gregory Wyczech, had a 1907 ten-dollar gold piece which was almost as precious to him as life itself. Aside from the single personal item, all the necessities and luxuries—food, clothing, bedding, and recreational material—were furnished by the home.

The only thing that Arthur Mindy brought with him when he entered the Goodwell Home was a complete collection of books by Ellery Queen.

Shortly after his admittance, arranged by a daughter who had grown weary of ministering to the constant needs of an 80-year-old man, Arthur Mindy sat in his small room, discussing his choice with Roy Carstairs, the first-floor attendant.

"I read my first Ellery Queen mystery at the age of forty-five," said Arthur, finishing his meager lunch. "It was at the beginning of the depression, and I had plenty of time for reading. For a long time I dreamed of solving a mystery just the way Ellery does."

"What's so different about the way he solves mysteries?" Carstairs asked.

"The pure logic of his solutions is beautiful," Arthur answered. "He uses only the smallest wisps of evidence, and from these he is able to arrive at the only possible solution. Take *The Roman Hat Mystery,* Ellery's first novel—I read it thirty-five years ago. It was solved when Ellery made deductions from an opera hat found near the body of the murdered man. In other books the pivotal clues have been things like a shoelace, a bottle of iodine, a collar, a packet of matches—all so insignificant! And sometimes the vital clues are things that should be there but aren't—what Ellery calls 'invisible clues.'

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"It's always been my ambition," Arthur went on dreamily, "to solve a mystery using only the one or two seemingly vague clues that Ellery Queen finds sufficient." He looked at the light brown walls of his tiny room and sighed. "But now I guess I'll never get the chance."

"Yeah, but Mr. Mindy," Carstairs said, "you've got to remember that—"

Whatever it was Arthur had to remember may never be known. At that moment a shout—the thin cracked voice of an old man—issued from the hallway outside the door.

Carstairs sprang from his chair and through the half-open door, followed at a more leisurely pace by Mindy. They were both brought up short by the scene in front of them.

In the middle of the thickly carpeted hall Gregory Wyczech, dressed only in the light green pajamas and robe which were almost a uniform at the home, was engaged in a boxing match with another similarly dressed resident. Although the sparring form of both men would have done mild credit to a Jack Dempsey or a Joe Louis, each man was standing well out of reach of the other.

While Carstairs stepped between the two combatants, Arthur Mindy looked at Wyczech's opponent. Eugene Dennison had been admitted to the home some time before Arthur. After a short but unsuccessful attempt on the part of the other men to become friendly, Dennison had been classified as a "cold fish." He never had any visitors, and his haughty manner repelled even the most amiable of advances. He refused to take part in any of the home's recreational activities. Television bored him. In the crowded world of the Goodwell home he walked aloof and alone.

Dennison stood stiffly just outside Gregory Wyczech's door while Wyczech circled him, chattering like an angry monkey. "He stole my eagle!" Wyczech repeated over and over.

"Your what?" Carstairs' eyebrows shot up.

"My eagle. My ten-dollar gold coin. He stole it!"

"Mr. Carstairs." Dennison spoke for the first time. His imperious tone brought silence to the hallway which by this time was beginning to fill with old men. "Mr. Carstairs, I have not stolen his eagle or whatever it is. I was on my way to the dispensary to renew my supply of pills. I took the elevator down since at my age the prospect of three flights of stairs is appalling. Congratulating myself for not having picked up a sliver from the wooden floor of that infernal machine, I came out of the elevator door which, unfortunately for me, is next to Mr. Wyczech's door. Then this idiot came around the corner, entered his room and burst

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out again, striking out at me. Naturally I fought back."

"You stole it!" Wyczech said again.

"I didn't."

"You did!"

"I did *not*."

"Wait a minute," said Carstairs. "How do you know he stole it, Mr. Wyczech?"

"Here's what happened," said Wyczech, catching his breath. "I'd just gone down the hall and around the corner to wash my hands. My gold coin was in its envelope on the table, and I wanted to wash before handling it. When I got back, just a minute later, the gold piece was gone, and this—this thief in the night was walking away from the door of my room. So I took a swing at him."

"You must have hit him fairly hard. I see you cut his cheek quite badly." Arthur pointed to a rather long, deep wound on Dennison's cheek from which fresh blood was now oozing.

"To lapse into the vernacular," said Dennison, "he never laid a glove on me. That's where I cut myself shaving this morning."

"Could anybody else have taken the coin?" asked Carstairs.

"Nobody would have had time," said Wyczech. "I wasn't gone that long. And no one else was around."

Dennison looked at the many pairs of accusing eyes turned in his direction. Then he opened the front of his robe and spread it dramatically. "If I submit to a search, will that satisfy everybody?"

Dennison shrugged off the robe and flung it at Wyczech. He removed the tops of his pajamas, loosened the bottoms, let them fall to the floor, and shuffled out of them. He stood on the green carpet, naked as a jaybird, without losing a particle of his massive dignity.

The clothing was quickly searched—even the seams and buttonholes. Nothing. No gold coin.

"He must have swallowed it," sputtered Wyczech.

"Mr. Carstairs, I leave it to you," said Dennison in the manner of a parent speaking to a dull-witted child. "You know the condition of what's left of my stomach. Considering that my diet for the past several years has consisted only of oatmeal and milk, could I have swallowed a piece of salami, much less a gold coin?"

"That's true, Mr. Wyczech," said Carstairs reluctantly.

Wyczech examined Dennison's hair and the inside of his mouth without results. Then he shrugged. "I still say he stole it. He was the only one who could have."

"Mr. Dennison," said Carstairs, "You go back to your room. I'll take care of Mr. Wyczech."

With a shrug Dennison reclaimed his clothing and not bothering to put it on, shuffled to the carpeted stairway across from Wyczech's room.

"Just a moment, please!" The

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men in the hallway looked to see who had spoken, and then Arthur Mindy stepped forward and faced Carstairs and Dennison.

"If you gentlemen would indulge me, I think perhaps I might be of some assistance. This case is reminiscent of 'The Black Ledger,' a story in *Q.B.I.—Queen's Bureau of Investigation*. In that story Ellery kept a long list of known criminals on his person the entire time he was being minutely searched by some desperate individuals who were determined to find the list. Ellery was stripped to the buff, just like Mr. Dennison here."

"Where did Ellery hide it?" asked Carstairs.

"That would be telling. I'll lend you the book sometime."

The attendant shook his head sadly. He was sure something had snapped in Arthur's mind.

"Now," Arthur continued, "if Mr. Dennison did take the coin, what did he do with it? Where did he hide it? Unless we can find that out, he's innocent by default. Let's see if the problem will yield to logic."

"Like Ellery Queen?" asked Carstairs, attempting to humor Arthur.

"Precisely. Now I ask you to consider two pieces of evidence, Mr. Carstairs. The first is that long, deep cut on Mr. Dennison's cheek."

"So he cut himself shaving, Mr. Mindy," said Carstairs. "What about it?"

"And the second is that Mr. Dennison is now preparing to climb the stairs to his room," Arthur concluded.

"So what?" moaned Wyczech. "Come on, great detective. Where's my coin?"

Arthur smiled. "You know," he said, "in Ellery Queen's earlier novels and in many of his short stories now, there's a point at which the reader is challenged to solve the mystery using only the facts given in the story. I'm sorely tempted to use that device right now."

EDITORS' NOTE: *Why not? If Dennison stole the coin, where did he conceal it? You now have all the facts . . .*

"Mindy!" screamed Wyczech. "You can't torture me like this! Where's my gold eagle?"

"Very well," said Arthur, "let's first consider the cut on Dennison's cheek. He said he cut himself shaving this morning. That would have been at least two hours ago, since lunch was just served. But you all noticed the cut was bleeding again. Fresh blood. Why?"

"Because Mr. Wyczech hit him?" Carstairs suggested.

"By Dennison's own admission, Wyczech never laid a glove on him. But tell me, Mr. Carstairs, what do you do when you cut yourself shaving?"

"Use a styptic pencil."

"But suppose the cut is long and deep?"

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"I'd stick a piece of adhesive plaster over it."

"Exactly. Adhesive plaster. And if Dennison had just torn a piece of adhesive tape from his face, it would have reopened a long deep cut. Right?"

"Right," said Carstairs.

"So now we have Dennison provided with a piece of adhesive plaster. Where is that adhesive tape? Evidence Number Two: what did he just do when he was told to leave? He went to the stairway, in spite of the fact that there is an automatic elevator waiting right here for him. What is so attractive about the stairway?"

"So he wanted some exercise," said Wyczech. "Get to the point."

"The point," said Arthur, "is that the stairs are carpeted, while the floor of the elevator is bare wood. When Dennison left the elevator and noticed the door to Wyczech's room open, he walked in—probably just out of curiosity—and saw the coin. He couldn't resist taking it, but as he went back into the hall, he heard Wyczech returning. So he had to conceal the coin in a place where it could not be found even if he were searched, but where it would be available to him as soon as he was allowed to leave."

"I don't get it," moaned Wyczech. 'Why didn't he go back to his room by the elevator?"

"He would have clicked."

"Clicked?"

"Clicked. Logically, the only place the coin could be is the one place on his person that we failed to search."

Arthur savored the silence of the men in the hall. At the age of 80 he was finally given his golden moment.

"You'll find it taped to the bottom of his foot."

Dennison was quickly forced to sit on the bottom stair, and on the ball of his right foot was found the gold coin, held there by a thin strip of adhesive plaster—just as Arthur Mindy had deduced. Dennison's face was now a mask of hatred. Then the mask came apart.

"I didn't mean to do it!" he cried out. "I just wanted something all to myself—something that belonged to me and not to everybody else, too. You men—you have relatives to come and see you. They bring you gifts and tell you about their families. You don't know what it's like to be really alone. I've got nobody—nothing." His thin body was racked by sobbing.

Gregory Wyczech sat down on the bottom step and put his arm around Dennison's shoulders. "I tell you what," he soothed. "You and me, we're gonna be partners. I'm giving you a half interest in my gold coin, see. Every other week you get to keep it—all to yourself."

The two old men stood up and crossed the hall while Carstairs gazed at Arthur Mindy in awe.

"Thank you, Mr. Queen," he heard Arthur Mindy murmur.

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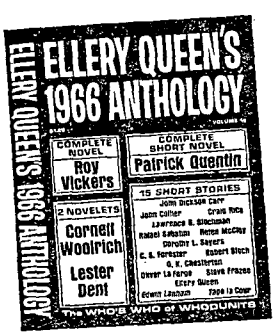

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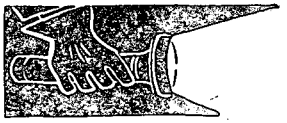

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

It's hard to imagine a more desirable author-omnibus than THE NOVELS OF DASHIELL HAMMETT (Knopf, $6.95), which contains the great and ageless pentateuch of RED HARVEST (1929), THE DAIN CURSE (1929), THE MALTESE FALCON (1930), THE GLASS KEY (1931) and THE THIN MAN (1934). One's only regrets are that it does not include the fine two-parter $106,000 BLOOD MONEY (*Black Mask*, 1927; Spivak, 1943), and that there still exists no companion volume of Hammett's shorter stories in hard covers.

Michael Innes' APPLEBY INTERVENES (Dodd, Mead, $4.95) contains A COMEDY OF TERRORS (1940), THE SECRET VANGUARD (1941) and ONE-MAN SHOW (1952)—not Sir John Appleby's most imaginative cases, but highly literate treatments of firm formal detection. Ian Fleming's MORE GILT-EDGED BONDS (Macmillan, $5.95) contains LIVE AND LET DIE (1955), MOONRAKER (1955) and DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER (1956); even those who (like me) are cool toward 007 can recognize here an inventive vigor lacking in Fleming's more recent work. And for hard-core bondists there is Kingsley Amis' THE JAMES BOND DOSSIER (New American Library, $3.95), a frequently witty and amusing survey bearing about the same relation to criticism as the Bond novels do to literature.

☆☆☆ **THE PALE BETRAYER, by Dorothy Salisbury Davis** (Scribner's, $3.95)

Subtle and poignant study in neurosis and treason, introducing competent and likable young Lieutenant Dave Marks, NYPD.

☆☆☆ **IS SKIN-DEEP, IS FATAL, by H. R. F. Keating** (Dutton, $3.95)

In contrast to Keating's earlier experiments, a straighforward strict detective story, with good surprises, fascinating details on beauty contests, and solid detection by Superintendent Ironside of the Yard.

☆☆☆ **MARCH TO THE GALLOWS, by Mary Kelly** (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $3.50)

Possibly too tenuous and indirect for some readers, but masterly development of the minute hints of murder lurking under the surface of conventional London-suburb life.

(*Continued on page 134*)

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(*Continued from page 133*)

★★★ **THE HOUSE AT SATAN'S ELBOW, by John Dickson Carr** (Harper & Row, $3.95)

In which Dr. Gideon Fell (in his first appearance in 5 years) averts rather than solves a murder, and explains an excellent locked room. (Appropriately dedicated to the managing editor of EQMM.)

★★★ **THE POWDER BARREL, by William Haggard** (Washburn, $3.95)

Intricate maneuvers, psychological and sexual, behind England's relations with an oil sheikdom—tense, tricky and convincing.

★★★ **A HIVE OF GLASS, by P. M. Hubbard** (Atheneum, $3.95)

How the collecting mania (for antique glass) can lead to murder—ironic modern treatment of richly Gothic material.

★★★ **RELATIVE TO DEATH, by Stanton Forbes** (Crime Club, $3.50)

Plucky 8-year-old detects and forestalls her own murder, with an assist from a traveling carnival; nice quiet domestic terror.

★★★ **DETECTIVE'S DUE, by Lesley Egan** (Harper & Row, $3.50)

Rape, ax murder, jewel theft and odder malefactions make a fine puzzle-package for Vic Varallo and his police colleagues in Glendale.

★★★ **SHADOW OF A MAN, by Doris Miles Disney** (Crime Club, $3.50)

Successful blend of police procedure with sensitive story of a wife who suspects her husband of rape and murder.

★★★ **THE WHIP HAND, by Victor Canning** (Sloane-Morrow, $3.95)

Love and money lead a private eye into the deadly wilderness of international intrigue. Canning's best thriller in some years.

★★★ **THE STORY-TELLER, by Patricia Highsmith** (Crime Club, $3.50)

Writer pretends ("for experience") that he has killed his wife—which leads to highly curious situations, explored with Highsmith's expected off-beat skill.

★★★ **BRIGHT ORANGE FOR THE SHROUD, by John D. MacDonald** Gold Medal, 50¢)

Vivid, violent, bitter adventure for Trav McGee, idealist-jackal.

Three paperback anthologies give good value in short stories: Marvin Allen Karp's CATCH A SPY (Popular SP370, 50¢), with 10 stories making a brief historical survey of short spy fiction; M. C. Allen's SHOCK! (Popular SP375 50¢), with 10 stories on the borderline between crime and fantasy-terror largely familiar but of high quality; and Henry Morrison's COME SEVEN, COME DEATH (Pocket Books 50122, 50¢), with 7 medium-boiled tales featuring such lively protagonists as Richard S. Prather's Shell Scott and Henry Kane's Peter Chambers.

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a NEW story about

INSPECTOR CHAFIK J. CHAFIK

Inspector Chafik, the slim dark Iraqi detective with the remarkable index-card memory, is one of the most popular characters ever to have been published in an American magazine. He began his distinguished career in "Collier's," where numerous Chafik stories appeared, many of which were reprinted in EQMM. We were privileged to publish only an occasional new tale of the compassionate and understanding little man with his compulsion for neatness and order and his irresistible habit of soliloquizing and philosophizing.

With "Collier's" no longer in existence, EQMM hopes to continue the saga of Inspector Chafik. Here is the newest Chafik story—a tale full of Baghdad color and sharply observed Middle East detail and deeply felt human interest. But above all, the story reveals that Inspector Chafik is a maker of criminous carpets: the threads he uses in his weaving are the facts of a crime . . . and his carpets do not always have pleasing designs.

A LESSON IN FIREARMS

by CHARLES B. CHILD

HE WAS A SMALL BOY ON A LONG road that crossed a desolate area at the back of the City of Baghdad.

The day was ending. The sun's afterglow daubed the cheeks of the drab, flat-roofed buildings which crouched like mendicants in the shadow of the towers and domes of Baghdad's many temples. Tigris, the sullen river bisecting the city, flamed beneath her mascaraed fringe of date palms. Yet nothing was so bright as the red hair of the boy on the road.

This was noticed by two men in an approaching police car.

"Observe, sir," said the driver in Arabic.

His passenger, a slim dark man neat in a cool white suit, replied, "Even the blind beggar at the city gates to whom just now I foolishly gave alms could not fail to observe."

The slim man broke the ash of his cigarette into the disposer on the car's dashboard. The slant of evening light made a mirror of the

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windshield and he admired his reflection. He had high cheekbones, a straight nose, a long upperlip smudged by a mustache; his watching eyes were dun-colored, cynical, and as flat as the land of his birth.

The slim man was pleased with himself as he adjusted his *sidarah,* the black peakless hat that proclaimed Moslem faith, and then sat back with the arrogance of an enthroned king. His ancestors had walked in Babylon.

"This one is a foreigner," he said about the boy on the road. "By costume and armament, American," he added decisively.

The boy wore faded blue jeans and a once-white T-shirt. The strings of his battered sneakers were undone. He had a gunbelt looped about his narrow hips; sometimes he stopped and drew the gun to challenge playworld enemies.

At the back of the gunbelt dangled a sheathed hunting knife.

The driver of the police car admired the boy's handling of the gun. "Very fast!" he said, and a rare smile cracked the mahogany veneer of his face.

"May he never draw anything but a toy!" said the passenger.

"Yes, sir. But this toy looks too real . . . and as you said, sir, he is an American—so undisciplined—"

The slim dark man squared thin shoulders. "Sergeant Abdullah!—the boy gives expression to his heritage of freedom!"

"Yes, sir." Sergeant Abdullah accepted reproof with a salaam; the hand that curved to his forehead was a bear's paw and with a bear's growl he added, "And if our river Tigris was so permitted to express itself, Baghdad would be inundated —"

The boy on the road was snub-nosed and freckled, and his grimed face was furrowed by tears. But he aimed a steady gun when the police car stopped.

"Bang!" he said.

Sergeant Abdullah's passenger spoke in precise English, "My bold outlaw, do you mistake us for a stagecoach?"

The boy fanned the gun and gave suitable sound effects.

"Ah! That got us!" There was warmth in the drab eyes of the man in the police car. "Now it's time," he went on, "for all young outlaws to be in bed. I'll take you home—"

"Don't want to go home! Never!"

The boy backed to the edge of the road which was built on a high embankment, precaution in season against the floods that bedeviled Baghdad. When Sergeant Abdullah, who was in uniform, eased his six-feet-two out of the car, the boy yelled, "Yah, cop!" and rode the slope of rubble to the wastes below the embankment.

The two men watched him run across the gray dusty land, leap the channels scoured by last year's monsoon, and dodge the thorns of the skeleton bushes that would be res-

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urrected when the next rains came. The sheathed hunting knife slapped his buttocks as he ran.

"Shall I pursue him, sir?" asked the Sergeant.

"Abdullah, neither your feet nor your dignity need be so uselessly wounded."

They watched the boy vanish behind the rising wall of the night. Over there was a district of abandoned slums where rats and scorpions held court, as the small dark man knew.

He dragged at his cigarette, frowned at it, then spat it out and said in the shrill voice of self-reproach, "You should have permitted Abdullah to pursue him!" And as he got into the police car he added, "Are you not father to a boy of that age?"

The tactful Sergeant said nothing as he drove into Baghdad by way of Alwiyah, a district of fine villas and gardens. They went up Rashid Street and it was quiet because this was the hour of *Magreb,* the sunset prayer. The car stopped at an unpretentious building in the government quarter and the small dark man got out.

He took the salute of a guard and went up a worn stairway into the smells of old crimes—the smells of any police headquarters anywhere in the world.

At the end of a narrow corridor was a door which had the inscription CHAFIK J. CHAFIK in black lettering on the frosted-glass panel.

Chief Inspector Chafik entered his office.

He had been absent for some days and there were red-tabbed papers on the desk demanding immediate action. And there was dust, so natural in Baghdad, so painful to Inspector Chafik. He exclaimed, "So this is what happens when I am away!" and took a dustcloth from the lower drawer of one of the many filing cabinets that walled his office. He was in process of dusting his chair when it came to him that he had made the complaint aloud.

Soliloquy was an uncontrollable habit, particularly when under stress. He realized he was thinking about the boy on the road, and also about his own son. In some way the elfin-faced, huge-eyed, faun-eared picture of the young Chafik became confused with the snub-nosed, tear-stained, freckled face of the red-headed foreign boy, and reproached him.

"But it's none of your business!" the Inspector shouted at himself.

He threw down the dustcloth and telephoned the Police Chief at Bab-al-Sheik, the district which included the slums where the American boy had disappeared.

"My dear *muffawadah,* there is a boy—" he began and went on to tell about the meeting on the road.

The Police Chief was amused. "He had a toy gun? One needs something more lethal to deal with the rats over there."

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"He should be in bed!" cried Chafik.

"My dear Chief Inspector! Regretably we cannot order boys, foreign or otherwise, to go to bed at suitable hours. And as for running away from home—well!"

Laughter lilted the *muffawadah's* voice and Chafik slammed down the telephone. He could see the man, the convexity of his uniform, the jowls of his cheery face. He was aware that the laughter had been directed at himself because of the devotion Chafik had for his son and thus the affection he had for all small boys.

Behind his back they called him in Arabic, "Father of Honeycakes." He never failed to make a lavish purchase of that sweetmeat before he went home; it was his son's addiction. The urchins who infested the city waylaid Chafik and he often had to go back for replenishment.

Angered by the Bab-al-Sheik Police Chief's jest, the Inspector muttered, "May he be blessed only with daughters!" and gave attention to the papers on his desk.

There was a report about one Nasir Kareem, who had a master's degree in crime. Prior to Chafik's departure from Baghdad, the Chief Inspector had been given information by a police spy about a shipment of raw opium that Kareem was said to be bringing in from Persia. A trap had been set, the shipment seized, but Nasir Kareem had, as usual, an unbreakable alibi.

"Ah, that Father of Filth!" Chafik exploded.

A superior's note attached to the report added to his anger. He stubbed out his cigarette, promptly lit another, and took refuge in work. The presence of a shadow that loomed against the pale green wall eventually disturbed him and he looked up.

"Sergeant Abdullah! Have you a *djinn* as an ancestor that you so ooze your entry?"

Abdullah apologized. "I knocked, sir, but failed to penetrate your concentration. There is a visitor, a very persistent foreign gentleman—"

"It is the curfew hour. Foreigners should not be about."

"Yes, sir. But this one claims acquaintance. His name is Bell—"

"Bell? An American?" Before the Sergeant could reply, Inspector Chafik went on in a colorless voice, "Bell, Richard. North American. Age, 35. Dark hair, gray-blue eyes, fresh complexion. Height, six-one, English measurement. Weight, 185 pounds, American measurement. Profession, civil engineer, under contract to the Department of Works, special assignment the Samarrah dam. No known political associations. Married. Name of wife—name of wife—"

He rapped his forehead with the heavy signet ring on the smallest finger of his left hand. The recitation was from police records and

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he was always annoyed when memory failed him. "Yes, and there is a son, a preadolescent and a recent arrival in Baghdad," he went on. "Doesn't the mother have red hair?"

Inspector Chafik pushed his papers aside.

"Where is your foreigner?" he abruptly asked Sergeant Abdullah.

"We have detained him, sir. He so urgently wished to see you that he was aggressive to the guard."

"And his stated business?"

"A missing son—"

"Yes, yes, I know! But this is the wrong department—our major clients are bodies with missing souls. Nevertheless, let the foreigner come to me—my heart is not a dried nut hanging on a tree."

When the American entered, Inspector Chafik stood to receive him, his hand curved to his forehead in a half salute and half salaam. Bell was a very large man and Chafik dismissed Abdullah; the presence of two such men in his office had caused him to stand tiptoe. He dusted a chair for the visitor, selected a cigarette from a silver case, and salaamed again as he offered it.

"I know you, Mr. Bell. We were guests at the annual dinner given by the Ministry of Works. We talked about our sons—"

"That's why I came to see you."

"Recklessly I jump hurdles! Your son has red hair, a freckled face, wears denium pantaloons, a soiled shirt, is armed with a toy gun and a large knife, and has run away from home but not from his tears. You disciplined him?"

The American jumped up. "How do you know all this? Yes, I did—he was rude to his mother and I spanked him and confined him to the house—but he's got a real temper and ran away. Dot—my wife Dorothy—phoned me. The boy has been brooding all day and when it was about time for me to come home he ran away. Ricky doesn't know Baghdad and I've got to find him—now!"

Bell slapped the Inspector's desk with a square strong hand.

"You will calm yourself," Chafik said. "I saw the boy on a road and I know the area where he is. They are already looking for him."

One of the telephones on his desk called. He lifted it and said, "*Nam?*" He added after a moment of listening to an excited voice, "I have one uncalm man here, so please soothe yourself, *muffawadah,* and clearly enunciate your facts."

When the Bab-al-Sheik Police Chief had made himself clear, Inspector Chafik rose from his chair, swept the loaded ashtray from the desk, slammed his fist against the wall, and turned a face like a bronze mask to the American. There were drifting shadows in his flat drab eyes and they were the shadows of vultures that gathered to a desert kill.

"Your son's knife was sharp?"

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"Yes—it's a hunting knife. What's all this about?"

"Mr. Bell, we have a dead man in the Bab-al-Sheik. He was repeatedly stabbed—"

"So what?"

"Mr. Bell, a constable reports seeing a boy who answers to the description of your son. He had a knife in one hand and a gun in the other—"

"What's that got to do with your dead man?" The American's anger was growing. "A scared kid would have his knife out," he went on defensively. "When Ricky's not play-acting he knows that gun's only a toy."

Inspector Chafik stood against the stature of the foreigner. His hands were clasped behind him and his sharp chin was tilted. The shadows had gone from his eyes, and there was only sadness.

"There is a toy gun in the hand of the corpse, Mr. Bell," he said.

The body lay with rotting garbage in the slum area of the Bab-al-Sheik. The skeletons of abandoned houses stood around it and their eyeless windows gaped against the darkened sky. Night birds dived and fluted as they hunted the clouds of insects that danced on the spirals of air rising from the cooling rubble.

"Such a petty crook!" said Inspector Chafik as he touched the corpse with a neatly shod foot.

He recited from the dossier, "Badir, Yusif. Parentage, place, and date of birth unknown. Gutter raised. First conviction at age of eight—theft of bread. Second conviction at ten—stealing the begging bowl of a cripple. Third—" Chafik shrugged and turned to the American with an apology for the soliloquy.

"Yusif Badir is potter's clay—he was never of any importance. We winked at his small crimes and made him one of our spies. Do you have police spies in your country, Mr. Bell? They disgust me yet they are a necessity—certain functions are. You can identify the gun?"

It lay in Yusif Badir's half-open hand and Bell nodded. "That's Ricky's," he said with emotion. "The kid prized it—he thought more of that gun than—if anybody tried to—"

The American stopped and looked quickly at the Iraqi detective, but the little man was kneeling to examine the corpse.

"So many stab wounds! Such anger!" commented Inspector Chafik.

They brought him a bowl of water and he cleansed his hands. He said to the officer who held the bowl, "Your name is Yacub?"

"Yes, sir—"

"You are the constable who saw a boy running through this rubble, a knife in one hand and what appeared to be a gun in the other?"

"Yes, sir—but I did not know—I—"

The man was not at ease. Chafik

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patted his arm and said gently, "Just tell it to me as the storytellers tell the tales of yesterday in our cafés."

Officer Yacub relaxed.

"Sir, it is my duty to patrol this neighborhood and I was told to watch for a boy, a foreign boy oddly dressed and armed with a toy gun. Such a boy appeared but he had a knife which I had not been told about. It flashed in the half dark as I advanced to question him."

"He menaced you with it?"

"No, sir. He menaced me with the toy gun, called me by name, then made explosive sounds."

Chafik was puzzled. "He called you by name? Now how is this? You never met him before the incident?"

"It bewilders me, sir. Yet he called me 'Yacub' many times as he made the bang-bang sounds, sir—"

The Inspector held back laughter and looked at Bell whose rugged trouble face found relief in a grin. "Yah, cop!" Chafik said side-mouthed to the American and turned to Yacub. "So the boy evaded you?" he asked.

"He was under my arm and away before I could move a finger. I called after him, but he shouted my name again and was finally gone. I very much blame myself."

"To grasp a running boy is to grasp quicksilver," Chafik said soothingly. "But continue. You followed in the direction the boy had taken and then found the body?"

"Yes, sir—"

"And it was a fresh corpse?"

"Quite fresh, sir—it was still warm."

Chafik dismissed the man and then faced the American, whose distress had changed to rage.

"You're making a case against Ricky!" Bell shouted.

"Mr. Bell, a maker of carpets needs threads for his weaving. My threads are facts and my carpets do not always have pleasing designs . . . There is a boy with a hot temper and he runs away from home and he has with him a toy gun and a sharp hunting knife. He has an obsessive attachment to the gun as you unwittingly revealed when I was examining the corpse—you expressed concern about Ricky's actions if anybody tried to take the toy from him."

"I didn't mean that! I meant—"

"But you had the thought, and it was not a nice thought," said Inspector Chafik in a hard voice. "You envisaged your son meeting with Yusif Badir, pointing the gun playfully, as at Officer Yacub, and having it snatched from his hand. And then—"

He tactfully looked away.

"No! Ricky didn't do this!" Bell made painful challenge to himself as well as to Chafik.

"Then believe what your heart tells you," the little Inspector said gently. "For your comfort, Mr.

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Bell, I commend you to the constable's evidence. Ricky did *not* menace him with the knife—only with the toy gun. So why should your son's behavior pattern change when—if—he met Yusif Badir?"

He watched hope dawn and added briskly, "Now I will send you home."

"But I've got to find Ricky!"

"Mr. Bell, we cannot have foreigners running about Baghdad at night—it would be necessary to deploy police to protect you. And have you forgotten your wife is alone with her fears?"

The American hesitated, then turned reluctantly to the waiting police car. Before he got in he said pleadingly, "You'll bring Ricky home as soon as you find him?"

"He will be with you before the lark and the muezzin greet the dawn," promised Inspector Chafik, his voice warm and confident.

When the car had driven away, Sergeant Abdullah reproved his superior.

"Sir, was it wise to give so much hope to a distracted father? The boy must be detained. The evidence of his guilt is overwhelming—"

"The evidence of a toy gun in the hand of the corpse?"

"That and the suspect's temper, sir—his foreign, undisciplined upbringing—"

"Abdullah! Prejudice rides you. Give heed to the obstacles along your course. What, for example, was Yusif Badir doing in this forsaken neighborhood?"

"It would appear he had an assignation."

"Would he have risked his throat for a sloe-eyed houri? This is a lonely place and he had so many enemies."

"I meant a business associate," the Sergeant said stiffly. "When we required his odious services we always arranged an eyeless and earless rendezvous such as this one."

Chafik nodded. "Police spies and jackals howl best in the wilderness. But we had no use for Yusif Badir this time. On the last occasion—"

"He informed against Nasir Kareem, sir."

"Ah, that Father of Serpents!" exclaimed the Inspector.

He threw down his cigarette, spat on it, and ground it into the dust. Briefly he had forgotten Nasir Kareem, the narcotics smuggler, and the report of the man's evasion of arrest. Chafik hated drug peddlers. Also failure was wounding to his ego, especially when his superior requested an explanation.

To disperse anger he swallowed the tranquilizer of the night. The stars were lanterns hanging from a tented sky. There was no moon. The lights of Baghdad were reflected in the mottled mirror of the Tigris. It was a very still night desecrated only by the cacophony of radios and gramophones coming from the city's cafés.

Somewhat soothed, the Inspector

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said, "Yusif Badir is in the Pit and Nasir Kareem will soon be flung there. It is as God wills. Our task is to find a runaway boy."

"The fugitive's whereabouts is a problem," mused Sergeant Abdullah. "If he had fled into the city our men would have picked him up—his description has been generally circulated. Therefore we may assume—"

"The odds are that he is somewhere in the ruins of these abandoned houses," said Chafik.

They looked at the ragged escarpment of broken walls that fringed the road. Beyond was a moonscape of desert.

"A likely place for the perpetrator to hide," agreed Abdullah. He loomed to his full six feet two and said briskly, "I will alert the constables and make a diligent search—"

"You will take them all away."

"Sir?"

"You will remove every heavy-footed 'yah-cop.' You will give this neighborhood back to the night, to the rats—and to me," commanded Inspector Chafik.

He noted his subordinate's disapproval and softened command with explanation. "We are not dealing with a 'fugitive' or a 'perpetrator'—only with a bewildered boy who is too stubborn or too afraid to go home. A police hunt would make him seek the remotest corner. Alone, I might coo him out of his hiding place."

"There may be others in hiding," warned the Sergeant.

"For those who have fangs I have this, and it is not a toy." Chafik patted the slight bulge under his left armpit. "Now go, give me two hours," he said with the rasp of rank. "And make inquiries about Nasir Kareem. I want a complete report about his movements," he added as an afterthought.

This was the dark of the night. The early planets had set and the soft glimmer of the stars draped the ruins with a cobweb haze. "The dawn is not even a glint in the eye of tomorrow's sun!" said Inspector Chafik to himself as he ventured into the labyrinth of the Bab-al-Sheik.

The fluting hunting birds of the evening had disappeared and a shift of the breeze had removed the city's sounds. It was so quiet he could hear the life that went on under the rubble—the talk of rats and the squeak and hiss of creatures unknown.

A scrape of horned claws warned him. He stood motionless as a crab-like shadow mounted the toe of his shoe and went over it, barbed tail nervously waving.

He spat his loathing of scorpions and prayed for the boy.

It is good to pray for help from There, but prayer can also be a man's evasion of responsibility. You, Chafik J. Chafik, are here to find a troubled youngster. You must ap-

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proach the problem psychologically as well as prayerfully.

Now think! He applied the discipline of his signet ring to his forehead. What does a boy do to escape from phantoms? He goes under the bedcovers—I cannot see it, therefore it is not!—but there is no such refuge here. So he must pull another kind of foxhole over his head.

"His hiding place would be a cellar," Chafik continued his reasoning aloud. "But what happens when the darkness, the odors, the company of rats and scorpions becomes unbearable?" he asked, and answered decisively, "The boy would be driven up into the clean air. He would seek the nearest refuge to God's heaven—yes, the towering peak of a *ziggurat*."

The Inspector permitted himself a smile. His Babylonian ancestors had probably raised the Tower of Babel to escape the fetid air of the flatlands of the Euphrates River.

He frowned his undisciplined voice to silence and moved with maximum caution as he got deeper into the huddle of buildings. He also reproved the faint shadow that followed him and shifted direction to lose it.

Presently he reached an open area and crouched to get the silhouette of the walls of the surrounding buildings against the sky. Most of the houses in this old quarter were two-storied and flat-roofed. One rooftop, towering above its neighbors, became the target of Chafik's interest.

The front of the roof was a flattened crescent with the horns lifted to the sky, a style of architecture dating back to the Turkish days of Baghdad. The place had been a pasha's *beyet* and was topped by a terrace where the women of the hareem could unveil and enjoy the evening breezes.

Chafik nodded approval of his reasoning. The boy would be driven from the crawling catacombs to seek refuge in the high air. This was the place, the *ziggurat*, the Inspector decided as he slipped into the deep shadow of the walls.

A moldering arch led into a patio overhung by sagging balconies. In the garden an aged date palm, dusty and impotent, kept company with a spoutless fountain. Inspector Chafik intruded.

Knowledge of these old buildings took him to a partly hidden stairway guarded by a sentry-box niche. No eunnuch's blade stopped him as he went up, lifting his knees to the high steps, stopping every now and then to listen.

He was disturbed by a faint sound like the rattle of miniature kettledrums, and eventually he traced it to the walls. Exploring with sensitive fingers, he traced the bulging tunnels of the termite runways that veined the crumbling plaster. Insect soldiers who protected the nests were drumming with

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their heads to warn the community of an alien presence.

Chafik wondered if he was the sole reason for their excitement. The noise grew louder as he mounted higher, and he guessed that the termite guards were concentrated near the exit to the roof. When Chafik made the last turn in the stairway, he could see the opening, a frame for the diamond chips of remote stars scattered on a background of velvet.

He lifted his foot to another step and then froze as his hunter's nose caught the acrid smell of fear. The outline of a head and shoulders filled the opening. Something silvery flicked, was quickly withdrawn.

"Don't you come any nearer! I'll stick it in you!" the shrill voice broke off with a sob.

Inspector Chafik required no force to take the knife from the boy.

"But you wouldn't have, would you, Ricky?" he said in casual English.

"I—no!—I—"

"You were frightened, Ricky. I came from nowhere, so you tried to defend yourself. You don't generally point knives at people, do you? Only guns—"

"That's playing. Pointing knives is wrong. Dad said so. He made me promise when he give it to me —"

"*Gave* it to me," the Iraqi detective corrected the American boy's English.

He was again reminded of his son, whose grammar, Arabic and English, sometimes required schooling. Chafik looked with tenderness on the freckled face turned up to him. He could sense the boy's bewilderment, his fear, and he wanted to ruffle the bright red hair and comfort him. Then he noticed the brass-studded belt looped about the youngster's slim hips; the leather flap of the gun holster hung as forlorn as an empty sleeve.

The Inspector remembered the toy gun in the dead hand of Yusif Badir. He also remembered his policeman's duty.

"Did that man take it from you?" he asked harshly. "What did you do then, eh? What did you do?"

There was no answer. Ricky was staring at him. He pushed the boy away and examined the knife, touching the blade and checking it with his nose and the tip of his tongue. The haft was sticky, but it was a boy's knife and nobody knew what a boy might get on his hands; a laboratory test would determine what a policeman suspected and a father did not want to believe.

He continued the accusing questions, but Ricky disarmed him by saying in a gay and friendly voice, "I know you! You were the man on the road—you had a cop in your car!"

"I too am a cop—"

"But you don't wear a uniform and you didn't chase me like he did!"

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"Abdullah is a good cop. He wanted to help you—"

"Yah!" Ricky had recovered his cockiness.

Chafik went down on his knees to bring his eyes level with the boy. He took the thin shoulders and admired the way they were braced. This little one has much courage, he told himself. But there are times when chicks should seek refuge under their mother's feathers.

"It's all right, Ricky. I'm going to take you home," the Inspector said gently. "But first you must answer a question. How did you lose your gun?"

"He took it."

"That man?" Chafik waved in the direction of the road.

"That guy dressed up in a nightshirt with a dishcloth wrapped around his head," Ricky described the native dress of Yusif Badir. "He was there in the dark when I come along and he frightened me so I pointed the gun but he knocked it out of my hand and grabbed it and then—then—"

Ricky's voice rose and his young body quivered as he flung himself against the Inspector and buried his tear-stained face in the immaculate white coat.

"They came!—the others!—and he—"

"What others, Ricky?" Chafik's mind leaped and his heart sang.

"A lot of guys. They come out of nowhere and this other guy, he turned on them and pointed my gun and then—then somebody had a knife and jumped this other man, and there was a lot of yelling and a scream, and I got scared and ran and hid in a dark hole and they come after me, but then they quit—something scared *them* I guess—and then—then—"

The flood of breathless words gave way to tears. Chafik rocked the sobbing boy and reprimanded his alter ego for a policeman's unjust suspicions.

When Ricky stopped reliving the terror that had come to him out of the night, the Inspector asked other questions and filled in the details. He concluded that the search for Ricky had been called off because of the unexpected arrival of the constable who discovered the body of Yusif Badir. The boy had remained hidden during the police investigation; he could not know they were police and had not ventured out until they had left.

"It was nasty down there—those things, they rattle!" The boy shuddered. "And those red eyes—rats! —I got out and went up high, as high as I could get—"

"To find refuge." The Inspector nodded, then yielded to impulse and rumpled the bright red hair. "Now tell me, Ricky," he went on casually. "When—that thing—happened, were you close enough to see any of the men?"

"The one with the knife. He was big and fat and he was dressed in

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clothes like you wear, and he had a mustache that sort of hung down and big eyes that kind of popped, and a lot of rings—I saw them when his hand came up and he stuck the knife—"

Chafik stopped the repetition of nightmare. He took an index card from the filing cabinet of his brain and matched it with the boy's description: Weight, 240 pounds. Broad face, thin drooping mustache, large bulging eyes. Neat dresser in European style, favors flashy jewelry, particularly rings. Expert with switchblade.

"Nasir Kareem!" He spat the name.

His fingers began a spider's dance as he untangled the web that held killer and corpse. Kareem, he was sure, had lured Badir to this isolated spot to punish him for informing about the shipment of narcotics, but intent to kill was unlikely. An informer, however odious to his employers, was guaranteed protection. To murder such a man was to challenge the quintessence of police power, and the habitually cautious criminal would not take that risk.

As Chafik saw it, they had ambushed Yusif Badir to give him a beating and he had thrown up a hand with natural reflex to ward off the blows—a hand that held Ricky's toy gun. Nasir Kareem, thinking it was a real gun aimed at him, had gone in with the knife.

"Which proves it is dangerous to point even a child's cap pistol at people," Chafik summed up.

He was thankful that his bilingual tongue had slipped into Arabic, not English, for this was no time to give Ricky a lesson about firearms. The Inspector had something more important on his mind.

"Did that fat man see you, Ricky?" he asked.

"Sure, he got a good look—"

So Nasir Kareem knows that the boy witnessed the killing of Yusif Badir, thought Chafik.

Ricky would be safe at home with a guard. But here on a rooftop in the abandoned area of the Bab-al-Sheik there was only one policeman to protect him—a small desk-based man who relied on the muscles of his bodyguard, the Inspector described himself to himself, regretting the absence of his familiar, the mahogany-hewn Sergeant Abdullah.

He looked at his watch. He had told Abdullah to give him two hours, and there was more than an hour to go before the Sergeant would return. The derelict area was close to Rashid Street, Baghdad's main thoroughfare, but a labyrinth of alleyways lay between and he wondered if he should risk the boy where the police hesitated to go. Equally, there was danger in waiting, for Nasir Kareem must be looking for Ricky.

Decision was tipped by an alien sound. Somewhere nearby the rubble had crumbled under pressure

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and the Inspector's heart drummed. The sound was repeated, this time from the other side. Then again from another location. A disembodied voice whispered a curse and other whispers slimed and coiled about the building.

"It's them! They know I'm here!" Ricky said with a boy's fear of approaching danger.

Chafik disciplined his arm to rest lightly about the young shoulders.

The rustle of the advance continued and he was reminded of the scorpion that had climbed his shoe.

Ricky said, "Of course you've got a gun, sir?" and the Inspector was pleased by the boy's confidence. Briefly he saw himself as the heroic lawman of the American West and the picture amused him; but the time had come to give Ricky that lesson about firearms and he sobered as he showed the small automatic.

"This thing's spit is effective at short range, so I keep it hidden—"

"Why hidden?" asked the boy with disgust. "I'd keep *my* gun out, I'd point it and pull the trigger—bang!—"

"And that would be your error," Chafik told his pupil. "A danger that cannot be seen spawns terror—weren't you frightened of the things in the cellar that you couldn't see? So it is with my little gun. *They* know I have a gun and imagination gives it the dimensions and authority of a cannon." The Inspector broke off and wagged an admonishing finger under the snub nose. "It is a very final thing to point a gun, Ricky. It unmasks one's power—or the lack of it."

He wanted to add that because Yusif Badir had pointed a toy gun he was now on a slab in the Baghdad morgue.

Chafik was careful not to say that on certain occasions such a weapon as Sergeant Abdullah's heavy Mauser was the best of all deterrents.

There were noises in the courtyard and he looked anxiously at his watch. He wondered how long he could employ delaying tactics. The element of shock was, of course, his major weapon, but once they had recovered they would know he had found the boy.

The beams of flashlights searched the corners of the ruins and the hunt would soon reach the roof. The question was from which direction they would come, for the main staircase was not the only way up. There would be egress from the hareem quarters, and certainly a private entrance for the pasha.

It was too dark to see the layout and Inspector Chafik decided to pull the psychological trigger.

He pushed Ricky into a corner where the boy was protected by the brick shaft of a *surdab* ventilator. Then the Inspector called down in harsh Arabic, "I hear you and I see you, Fathers of Scorpions!" He exposed his face to the glare of the flashlights and with an actor's skill

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twisted it into the likeness of a demon's mask.

They were so still, so silent, that he could again hear the drumming of the termites. Perhaps it is Nasir Kareem's men who hammer their heads against the wall, he thought; then with perfect timing Chafik withdrew as a barrage of oaths and bullets befouled the night.

"See how well they know me! Could a film star rouse so much emotion?" he jested to Ricky.

The boy's answering giggle reassured the Inspector.

He returned to conduct the orchestra of hate. He knew his people so well; so long as their frenzy could be channeled into a verbal onslaught, they were manageable. When they ran out of insults they became a frightening monster, the street mob.

There were arguments about the best way to reach him, and even blows were exchanged. Confusion kept them concentrated where he wanted them, at the foot of the stairway. They were afraid to attack. They were not cool enough to think of looking for other ways up. They were a headless mob—they needed a leader.

A leader . . .

Chafik had not heard the voice of Nasir Kareem and it worried him. A silent Nasir Kareem was to the Inspector's imagination what the silent gun was to the men below. He began to sweat and tried to peer through the smothering darkness.

He had gained valuable time. Sergeant Abdullah was due to return within half an hour and, like Death, the Sergeant was never late for an appointment. Half an hour, thirty minutes, eighteen hundred seconds, Chafik computed. For the first time he kept his finger on the trigger of the automatic.

The baton of his tongue appeared to have lost authority, the response to his insults was so subdued. He tried to smoke out Nasir Kareem by reaching into the dregs of Arabic nastiness and taunting that the grave of Nasir Kareem's father had been defiled by a dog.

The diatribe was unanswered.

Then, as if to a signal, the barrage of oaths and shots broke out with new intensity. The Inspector pulled back from the stairway; he was more worried by the prelude of silence than by the fortissimo of the attack.

A diversion?

He confirmed the suspicion in the single moment it took him to turn. Ricky had moved out from the shelter and was looking back along the roof. The stiff set of his body indicated shock; the boy made a faint sound, either of protest or warning, as he pointed at the thing that had crept up behind him.

A bulky shadow.

Chafik saw the knife, held low and hooking for the thrust, and he knew as he swung up the little gun

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that he couldn't make it. Ricky was in the way.

The heavy man with the bulging eyes cried out, "Father of Hangmen!" at Chafik, and went in to kill the boy.

Out of nowhere came a thunderclap. Nasir Kareem, arms extended and whirling like a dervish, was flung into his darkness.

A voice from below said, "Sir?"

Inspector Chafik looked at his watch and disciplined himself to say chidingly, "You are twenty minutes early, Sergeant Abdullah."

"Yes, sir. But in accordance with your instructions I instituted inquiries into the activities of Nasir Kareem. He was reported coming here with a considerable force, so I deemed it advisable to follow him."

The spotlights of police cars were probing the ruins and there was shouting and the sound of blows. Presently the Sergeant came up on the roof and apologized for the noise.

"Reaction, sir. I emphasized the necessity for silence when we moved in. Now the constables express themselves."

He looked briefly at Nasir Kareem and said, "The deceased foolishly outlined himself against the sky. He did not present too difficult a target—for this—"

The Sergeant touched the worn holster on his hip with a hand expanded like a cobra's hood. He had ignored Ricky. The boy was looking up at him, up and up to the military *sidarah* and the brass badge that seemed one of the constellation of the stars.

"Neat!" Ricky said in an awed voice, and he added, "Hi, Cop!" as he flicked his hand in a gay salute.

Inspector Chafik was not sure, but he thought the veneer of Sergeant Abdullah's dour face cracked with a smile.

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Here is the third in EQMM's new series about "The Double-C Man"—Rand, head of the Department of Concealed Communications . . . a classic story of espionage and counterespionage.

THE SPY WHO CAME TO THE BRINK

by EDWARD D. HOCH

THE GIRL WAS SLENDER AND DARK-haired, and very pretty. "I feel like a fool," she told Rand, gazing across the desk with uncertain eyes.

"Nonsense," he reassured her. "You did the right thing in reporting it. Now suppose you start at the beginning and tell me everything that happened."

"That's the trouble. Nothing happened except that I saw this man taking a wax impression of the lock—the way they do in the movies, and—"

Rand smiled slightly. "You haven't even told me your name, or where you work."

"What? I thought my boss phoned you."

"I'd like to hear it all from you, if I may. From the beginning."

She shifted in the chair and crossed her legs. "Well, my name is Audrey Fowler, and I'm a pool typist in the Foreign Office. I've been there nearly three years and I like it a lot. The girls are so friendly, and there are lots of handsome men—"

Rand cleared his throat. "About yesterday."

"Oh! Yes. I don't usually work on Sundays, of course, but with all those television people around—"

"What television people?"

"They're filming a show about diplomats and they got permission to take some shots in the Foreign Office lobby. I guess then they go back to the studio sets for the office scenes. Some of us had to be there, anyway, to help out."

"Are you an American, Miss Fowler?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"You talk a little like one."

"I was born right here in London. But I see a lot of American movies."

"Go on," he urged. "I'm sorry I interrupted."

"Anyway, I was coming out of the office on the second floor when I saw this man. He was at the door to the restricted wing, where the Message Center is. He took something out of the lock and dropped it very carefully into a little plastic bag. Honest, it was just like in the movies!"

Rand nodded. "A wax-coated blank key, probably. Do you know

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what's kept in the Message Center?"

"Lists of embassy personnel in various countries, teletype machines —"

"Anything else?"

"Well, the diplomatic code—oh, the code book! I'll bet that's why they sent me to you!" She glanced over her shoulder at the frosted-glass door with the words *Department of Concealed Communications* neatly lettered on it.

Rand shifted in his chair and lit an American cigarette, one of his few vices. "What did the man do when you saw him?"

"He said good afternoon and went back downstairs, as if it was nothing at all."

"Did you recognize him?"

"Of course I recognized him! That's the whole point of it!"

"And who was he?"

"Barton O'Neill, the television actor. Why do you think Barton O'Neill would want to steal the diplomatic code?"

"That's what we're going to find out," Rand said.

Rand rarely ventured into the other departments of British Intelligence, because his job was concerned more with words than with people. But men like Hastings were always glad to see him.

"Well, Rand, how've you been?"

"Good as ever." He shook the hand of the balding man.

"What's up? You usually bring trouble."

Rand laughed. "Not this time. I only want some information. About a television actor named Barton O'Neill."

"Officially or unofficially?"

"Let's start with the official information."

Hastings shrugged, pretending indifference. "He's a character actor on television, bit parts mostly. Age forty-five, divorced twice."

Rand reached for a cigarette. "Now the unofficial part."

"We've suspected for some time that Barton O'Neill is one of the smartest foreign agents now operating in London. We think he's available to the highest bidder, with most of his work done for Moscow or Cairo."

"You haven't arrested him?"

"He's too clever for that. We had proof on only one job, but there were political reasons for not arresting him. Actually, we've never caught him violating the Official Secrets Act."

"He's British?" Rand asked.

The balding man nodded. "Did you ever hear of the Legion of Saint George, later called the British Free Corps? It was an attempt by the Germans during World War II to enlist British war prisoners to fight on the Russian front. It was mainly a propaganda effort, and only a few dozen men joined up. Several of them were tried for treason after the war, but we never had enough

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evidence against O'Neill. We've kept our eye on him ever since, though."

"Interesting."

"Now it's your turn, Rand. What's he up to?"

"One of the typists at the Foreign Office claims she saw him taking a wax impression of a lock there yesterday."

Hastings didn't seem surprised. "Since you and Double-C are interested, I gather the diplomatic code must be involved."

"It seems to be. I always thought the security arrangements there were safe enough. There's a twenty-four-hour guard in the lobby to check passes, and a locked door leading into the restricted wing. Then there's a guard at the door of the Message Center and people working inside day and night. Of course all personnel are carefully screened."

"And the code books"

"They're constantly in use, so they're not locked up regularly. There's one on each of the six desks in the Center, where people are on duty at various hours. Messages come in from embassies constantly. They're decoded at the Center and sent upstairs by pneumatic tube."

Hastings scratched his head. "How did O'Neill get by the guard in the lobby?"

"He's apparently part of a television company that had permission to film in the lobby. With so much confusion it would be simple for him to slip away for a few minutes."

"Aren't those people screened before permission of that sort is granted?" Hastings asked querulously.

"Do you have any idea of the number of people necessary to produce a television show? It would take a month to check them all, and then who would you exclude? A security risk can include anyone from an outright spy to a homosexual or a neurotic. Besides, I assume the Foreign Office regarded their code books as quite inviolate."

"If he made a wax impression, he must be planning to return."

Rand nodded. "I already checked. The television company winds up its shooting on Wednesday evening, after regular office hours. Barton O'Neill is almost certain to try for a code book then, if he's going to try at all."

"Even though this girl recognized him?"

"He's a bit player. He probably doesn't realize he was recognized by a film and television fan."

"Even after he gets through that locked door to the restricted wing, how can he walk past the inside guard and into the Message Center where people are always working, and then out again with a thick code book under his arm?"

Rand chewed on his lower lip. He was thinking of a man named Taz in Moscow who would give a great deal to be able to read the coded messages which passed between British embassies throughout

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the world. "That's what we'll find out Wednesday night," he said. "And I'll be there myself to give O'Neill a little surprise."

On Wednesday evening Rand felt good. The February air was sharp but clear, and for the first time in weeks his annual sinus attack seemed to be easing. The work at the office was well under control, and the minor irritation of an actor named Barton O'Neill promised to be cleared up with ease.

Rand had stationed one of his best men—a young fellow named Parkinson—inside the lobby of the Foreign Office, and he himself would be watching O'Neill's arrival with the other actors and technicians. When the actor used his duplicate key to enter the restricted wing, he'd be arrested on the spot. A simple affair, really, thanks to the girl's report.

Rand stood in the shadow of a little bookstore opposite the Foreign Office, waiting for O'Neill to appear. A few people hurried by, bound for a late dinner or the theater, but mainly the street was empty. Most of the halls of government had long since closed for the night.

The Double-C man recognized O'Neill almost at once. He was walking alone, carrying the sort of attaché case popular with diplomats and American advertising men. He was tall and grayishly handsome, much like the photos Rand had studied for the past two days. He looked like a government official. Or an actor.

Rand moved out to follow him at a distance of a dozen paces. He didn't see the other man until that man stepped directly in front of Barton O'Neill, materializing out of the shadows like a ghost. The man wore a dark leather jacket with a cap pulled down over his eyes. He might have spoken a word or two to O'Neill, but Rand couldn't be certain. Then, without warning, the stranger fired two shots through the pocket of his leather jacket.

Barton O'Neill half turned, clutching his chest. The man fired a third time and then Rand was on him, toppling him backward to the pavement. Somewhere a woman screamed, and suddenly the street was alive with panic. Rand brought his fist down on the gunman's jaw and then tore the weapon free from limp fingers.

Parkinson and a uniformed policeman were already running across the street, fighting their way through the gathering crowd. "What happened?" Parkinson call out.

Rand, catching his breath, looked over at the actor's crumpled body. "This man shot O'Neill."

The policeman knelt for a moment, carefully avoiding the spreading pool of blood, and then shook his head. Barton O'Neill was dead, and the game was ended—and yet Rand had the gnawing feeling that

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he had witnessed a carefully planned drama that he didn't even begin to understand.

For most of Thursday the head of Double-C tried to ignore it. O'Neill's murder might only have been the work of some would-be bandit, or even of a wronged husband. There was no reason why it had to be connected with the actor's attempt to steal the diplomatic code. None at all.

All morning had been spent inspecting the extremely interesting contents of O'Neill's attaché case. There was a carefully made duplicate key to the locked door on the second floor of the Foreign Office. There was a man's black wig, a pair of bushy false eyebrows, two tubes of makeup, and a small metal mirror. There were three large candid photographs of a man identified as James Corbin, an employee of the Foreign Office Message Center.

And last, there was a book about the size of a desk dictionary, carefully bound in impressive black cloth, and filled with 882 pages of recipes and cooking suggestions.

"A cook book?" Parkinson asked, somewhat unbelieving.

Rand nodded. "But a specially bound cook book. The binding is almost identical with that of the diplomatic code books, and the size is the same too. I think we can piece together his plan. During a lull in the filming downstairs, he'd slip up to the second floor, just as he did on Sunday. In the stairwell he'd open his case and make himself up to look like James Corbin, one of the employees on the day shift. Then he'd simply unlock the door, walk past the inner guard with a mumble, go to Corbin's desk, and switch this cook book for one of the real code books. It would go into the attaché case, and he'd be out of there in a couple of minutes. Anyone on duty in the room would probably be too busy to give him more than a glance."

Parkinson shook his head. "He couldn't have gotten away with it."

"That's something we'll never know. He obviously thought he could. Check on this Corbin fellow right away, will you?"

Parkinson returned in an hour with the news that James Corbin—the real James Corbin—was vacationing in the south of France for two weeks.

"But," Parkinson argued, "the inside guard would have asked him why he wasn't away on his holiday. He'd have had to say something—and how do we know he could imitate Corbin's voice well enough?"

"He was a character actor as well as a secret agent. We'll have to assume he thought he could bring it off. He was in the building and he had a key, and that would have automatically canceled out a lot of suspicion. He must have met Corbin at some time, though—perhaps over a few beers at a pub one night. Maybe that's how he learned about

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the size and binding of the code books, if he didn't learn it from another agent. We'll have to question Corbin when he returns. Even a completely trustworthy person can let things slip at times."

Toward mid-afternoon a phone call from Scotland Yard brought news of O'Neill's killer. He was a suspected Communist named Ivar Kaden, an unemployed dockworker with a long criminal record. On the morning of the murder he'd been visited at his flat by a minor official of the Russian Embassy.

"All right," Rand conceded reluctantly to Parkinson. "So the Russians order a man killed just as he is about to steal our code book for them. Why? Was it a mistake, or what?"

"They don't make many mistakes, sir," Parkinson said.

"Then why did they have O'Neill killed?"

"Because he knew too much. Spies always know too much."

"Too much about what?"

"I don't know, sir."

Rand was still enough under forty to resent being called "sir," but he never corrected Parkinson. The fellow did his job, and he was acquiring a good knowledge of the intricate world of Concealed Communications. But just then Rand wanted to think, so he sent Parkinson away.

Alone, staring out the window at the great sweep of the muddy Thames, he wondered how the weather was in Moscow that day. He often wondered about Moscow, and sometimes he tried to visualize the man in the Kremlin who was his counterpart. He knew nothing about Taz except his name, which was the same as a river in western Siberia. Sometimes he pictured a gentle little man who worked eight hours a day over coded messages and secret writings, and then took the Moscow subway home to a wife and four waiting children. On days like this, though, when Taz became the shadowy figure on the other side of a giant chessboard, Rand pictured something quite different.

Was it Taz who had pressed a button in Moscow and ordered the death of Barton O'Neill on a London street? The same Taz who went home every night to his wife and four waiting children? Rand sighed; he knew there were men in London and Washington and Paris who did the same thing.

There was a soft knock on the frosted-glass door and Hastings entered, carrying a folder of reports. "I have an idea about this O'Neill thing," he said.

"What's that?"

"Well, he was an actor. And actors often have stand-ins or doubles, don't they? Look, the Russians have been after one of those code books for five years now. They certainly wouldn't murder the one about to get it for them, would they? I think the man they killed was O'Neill's double, and the whole thing was some sort of diver-

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sion to cover the real theft of a code book."

Rand smiled. "They've checked the dead man's fingerprints. It was O'Neill, all right. Besides, a bit-part character actor wouldn't be likely to have a double." He paused to light a cigarette. "In any event, I was prepared for a possible diversion. The real code books were moved to a room upstairs on Monday. The Message Center has just been going through the motions since then, sending messages upstairs still encoded."

"Maybe that's it," Hastings said. "The Russians found out you were setting a trap and killed O'Neill."

But Rand would have none of it. "Everyone in that Message Center is completely loyal—I'd stake my life on it. Besides, if there is a spy there, O'Neill's complex plot would have been completely unnecessary."

"What about the girl who saw O'Neill taking the impression of that lock?"

"Audrey Fowler? We've checked her. She's a bit naive, but perfectly trustworthy. She'd hardly have reported O'Neill in the first place if she weren't."

"So what do we have?"

Rand shrugged. "A dead spy."

"Why?"

"Perhaps because he knew too much. About something."

The next day, Friday, Rand went down to visit Ivar Kaden in jail. He interviewed him in a bare room with pale green walls and barred windows. The man was sitting across the table while a guard stood silently with his back to the door.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions," Rand began.

Kaden was stocky with middle age, and a shadow of beard traced itself across his cheeks. "You're the one jumped me the other night," he said, and his muscles seemed to ripple at the recognition.

"It was my job," Rand told him. "The same as your job was killing Barton O'Neill."

"You're bloody right! That was my job and I did it."

"How much did they pay you?"

A sly smile now. "Enough."

"Why was he killed?"

"Look, mister, I don't ask questions and I don't answer them. I do my job, that's all."

"Are you a Communist, Ivar?"

The bulky man shifted in his chair, looking at his hands. "I guess so. I guess I would be if I knew what they were talking about."

"Who paid you to kill O'Neill?"

His eyes came up to meet Rand's. "Do you really think I'll tell you, mister?"

"You don't have to, Ivar. We know the orders came from a Russian agent. Just one thing—did they tell you *when* to shoot him?"

Ivar Kaden hesitated and then said, "Before he went into the Foreign Office on Wednesday night."

"Yes," Rand mumbled to himself. "Before." He got to his feet and mo-

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tioned to the guard. "I'm finished. You can take him back."

Rand left the building and drove back to his office. He phoned the Foreign Office to check once more on the code books; all were safe. He had to face the fact that Barton O'Neill had been killed by the Russians at the very moment he was about to perform an important and vital mission for them.

There seemed only one possible explanation—that they had feared a trap and killed O'Neill to keep him from talking. But what could the actor tell? He was not a regular Communist agent—more of a free-lance operator who sold his secrets to the highest bidder. It was doubtful that he would know any more about the secret workings of the Soviet espionage network in England than was already on file at British Intelligence.

Sitting alone in his office, Rand had almost decided to drop the investigation. After all, the code was safe, the spy was dead, the assassin was in prison. What more was there to do? Did it really matter *why* they'd had him killed?

Parkinson came in with a report. "This man from the Russian Embassy," he began, eager to deliver his news. "British Intelligence has a constant watch on him. His name is Barsky, and he's a known agent."

"That's the one who visited Ivar Kaden on Wednesday morning?"

Parkinson nodded. "But more important, a man believed to be O'Neill was seen in a pub with Barsky on Monday. Does that help?"

"It only confirms what we already suspected," Rand told him. "O'Neill must have got the idea of going after a code book when he landed the part in this television play being filmed in the lobby of the Foreign Office. He must have already known there was a man in the Message Center whom he could impersonate. And once he got that impression of the lock on Sunday, he knew the last obstacle to a code book was removed. So on Monday he made his offer to the Russian contact man."

"The Embassy sent the word to Moscow—to Taz, probably—and the word came back to kill O'Neill. Does that make any sense, sir?"

Yes, Rand conceded to himself, they were back to the same puzzle. "Many things don't make sense in this business, Parkinson," he replied weakly.

"Perhaps they thought he already had one of the code books. Using the key and his disguise, he could have entered the building at any time."

Rand shook his head. "One thing we failed to find in his attaché case was any sort of false identification. He apparently was unable to forge the necessary pass to get him past the guard in the lobby. He could only work his plan when he was already inside the lobby with the television crew. Since he had to have time to make the duplicate key, he

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couldn't try for a code book until Wednesday night."

"Without identification, how could he have gotten by the second guard, at the Message Center door?"

"You know how those things are, Parkinson. The first guard would have been a lot more careful than a guard checking on only a half dozen people he sees every day. Once through that locked door, O'Neill was apparently sure he could bring off the rest of it by using his makeup and his acting abilities."

"So what have we got, sir?"

Rand closed his eyes. "We have an agent with a better-than-even chance of stealing one of our diplomatic code books and getting away with it. Although it would be tremendously important to the Russians to get their hands on it, they have the man killed just before his mission is accomplished. Why?"

Why? The question remained, even after Parkinson had left the office. Rand sat brooding about it in silence, knowing that he could never drop the case until he knew the answer. He thought of talking to the girl at the Foreign Office again, but somehow he knew the answer didn't rest there.

He went to the window and pressed his forehead against the cold glass, staring out at the muddy Thames, trying to put himself in the place of a man in Moscow whom he'd never met.

Why did they kill him? Because he knew too much? No.

Because he knew too little?

Rand's head came away from the window and he snatched up the telephone. "This is an emergency! Get me the Foreign Secretary!"

"Too little?" Hastings repeated later, not sure he understood.

Rand nodded from behind a cloud of relaxed cigarette smoke. "O'Neill was killed because he knew too *little*, not too much. I knew the code book had to be involved somehow, and then I remembered an incident in World War II. A team of American and British cryptanalysts broke the code used by Japanese military attachés. But the OSS wasn't informed of this, and they managed to steal a copy of the code book in Lisbon. Of course the Japanese immediately stopped using the stolen code—*and the cryptanalysts had to start all over again!*"

"You mean the Reds. . . ?"

Rand nodded and poured some brandy. "I'm sure of it. Remember, we've been using that same diplomatic code for five years. Sometime in those five years Taz's people broke it. Now, what would you do, Hastings, if you were sitting in Moscow with our secret diplomatic code broken, reading our messages every week, and some free-lance agent you couldn't control said he was going to steal that very code for you?"

Hastings nodded, seeing it all

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clearly. "Even if he got away with it, we'd have discovered the theft in a couple of hours or days and promptly changed the code. And they couldn't just order him not to steal the book, because he'd have done it anyway and sold it to another government. All they could do is what they did—kill him before he stole it."

"A dirty business," Rand said, staring out at the lights of the London night. "Dirty."

"What will you do now?"

Rand took a sip of brandy. "I've already done it. Our embassies switched to an emergency code book this afternoon. Taz is in for a surprise when he tries to decode the next message."

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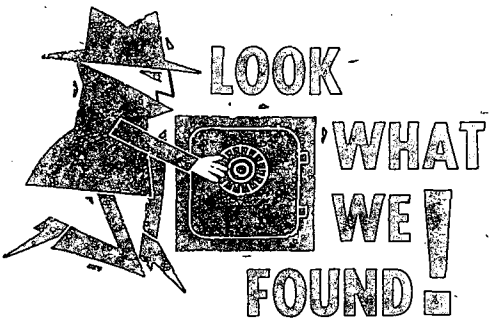

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